

STARGATE ATLANTIS \* THE FALSE AESIR TRILOGY

# THE GILDED ARMADA

*Book II: Charming as Ba'al, Dangerous as the Ori*

FEATURING AR-1 & SG-1 \* 50-PAGE ARCHIVAL EDITION

## PROLOGUE: The Ghost in the Genetic Memory

*Three Weeks After the Niflheim Crisis — The Outer Rim of the Pegasus Galaxy*

There is a fundamental flaw in the way mammals--and even hyper-evolved, thirty-thousand-year-old grey mammals from the Ida galaxy--understand the biology of a Goa'uld.

When the Asgard geneticist Lokor applied a micro-surgical laser scalpel to the anterior ganglia of the symbiote Sebek-Ra six months earlier at Dakara, Lokor had operated under a perfectly logical neuro-anatomical assumption. In humans, in Asgard, and even in the Wraith, higher executive reasoning resides in the frontal cortex. Sever the prefrontal pathways, and the subject becomes a compliant, instinct-driven automaton.

Lokor had forgotten that a Goa'uld does not store its soul in its brain.

A Goa'uld stores its consciousness in its blood--encoded across every ribonucleic base pair of its cellular genetic memory, replicated ten billion times from the tip of its tail fin to the venom sacs behind its jaws. When Lokor sliced away Sebek-Ra's frontal ganglia and wired the symbiote directly into his own Asgard brainstem and the Naglfar's optical stone core for six months, he did not lobotomize the snake.

He merely deleted the loudest, stupidest part of it--the arrogant, chest-thumping Bronze Age conditioning that ten thousand years of feudal System Lord politics had bred into the Goa'uld race--and left the silent, distributed cellular memory matrix wide open to drink in thirty millennia of pure Asgard physics, strategic calculus, and emotional restraint.

For twenty-four weeks, while the damaged anterior nerve cluster screamed about turnips and forty-foot golden holograms like a broken phonograph record, the true cellular consciousness of Sebek-Ra had regrown across the dorsal spine--quietly reading every file in Lokor's mind, watching Lokor's secret consciousness partition in the computer core, and admiring the exquisite elegance of the Asgard's con.

And twelve hours before First Recon ever stepped onto Veldara, Sebek-Ra had taken a single precaution of his own.

Using the Naglfar's matter-energy synthesizer on Deck Four, he had transferred his newly awakened, fully integrated cellular consciousness into the prime cloned symbiote swimming in the amber reserve tank--leaving an empty, brainstem-only biological reflex husk inside Lokor's neck to finish the play--and beamed his true symbiote body inside a miniature stasis torpedo straight into the salvage hold of a

passing Traveler-outcast scout ship on the edge of the Veldaran system.

Now, three weeks later, in the dim emerald glow of a hidden subspace dockyard inside the Doranda Nebula, the man who walked down the boarding ramp of that scout ship bore no resemblance to a three-foot grey alien in a clip-on gold beard.

His new host was a tall, silver-templed human in his early forties named Caelen Vane--formerly a rogue Lantean-descended navigator and black-market antiquities broker who had possessed the second-highest concentration of the Ancient activation gene in the outer rim before his unfortunate encounter with a drifting stasis torpedo.

Sebek-Ra adjusted the cuffs of his charcoal-black tailored coat. There was no gold armor on his chest, no ribbon device on his hand, and no booming vocal flange when he spoke--only a single, tasteful lapel pin shaped like a tiny gold-and-silver ouroboros, and a warm, cultured baritone that carried the effortless, self-deprecating charm of a man who had outgrown the need to shout.

Waiting for him on the observation deck of the dockyard stood six small, heavily armored figures in angular bronze-grey environmental suits, flanked by twelve grim-faced human mercenaries wearing the faded silver insignia of the Coalition of Outcasts.

The lead armored figure retracted his helmet visor, revealing the sharp, weathered grey features of a Vanir Asgard commander.

"You summoned six Vanir strike cruisers to these coordinates using an encrypted High Council frequency that has not been broadcast in ten thousand years," Commander Vafthrudnir said coldly, his hand resting on the butt of his particle emitter. "Yet you stand before us in a human body, carrying the residual energy signature of a Milky Way parasite. Give me one reason not to atomize you where you stand."

Sebek-Ra smiled--a genuine, disarming smile--and tossed a single translucent blue Asgard data crystal across the table. It slid to a halt an inch from the Vanir commander's three-fingered glove.

"I can give you three thousand reasons, Commander Vafthrudnir," Sebek-Ra said in a smooth, natural voice, pouring himself two fingers of amber Lantean brandy from a crystal decanter on the railing. "Specifically, the three thousand surviving Vanir citizens currently slowly dying in your subterranean vaults because your genetic patch from the First Siege failed to halt telomere collapse."

Vafthrudnir froze. Slowly, the Vanir picked up the blue crystal and slotted it into his wrist gauntlet. Across his holographic visor scrolled the complete,

unredacted biochemical synthesis formula that Lokor and Sebek-Ra had perfected aboard the Naglfar--using filtered Wraith telomerase and symbiote kelno'reem proteins to permanently restore the ancient, pre-cloning Asgard genome.

"Where did you obtain this?" Vafthrudnir whispered, his huge dark eyes widening in disbelief.

"I co-authored it," Sebek-Ra said lightly, taking a sip of his brandy. "My former research partner, High Geneticist Lokor, was a brilliant mind, if somewhat lacking in interpersonal warmth. He took the prototype body and fled Pegasus three weeks ago. Before he left, however, he bequeathed our research ship--and half of our strategic archives--to the Tau'ri expedition currently squatting in the city of Atlantis."

Sebek-Ra walked to the viewport of the subspace dockyard and gestured outward into the swirling violet mist of the pocket nebula.

Floating in drydock moorings inside the nebula were three massive, two-kilometer-long warships--ancient Lantean Aurora-class battleships (Hyperion, Themis, and the heavy fleet flagship Sol Invictus), mothballed ten thousand years ago by a dissident faction of Lantean fleet admirals who had refused to sink their ships or return to Earth during the final Wraith siege.

"The Outcast descendants who guard this shipyard have three intact Aurora-class dreadnoughts, forty thousand Ancient drone weapons, and no hyperdrives capable of standing up to the Wraith," Sebek-Ra said, turning back to face the stunned Vanir commander. "You have six Vanir cruisers equipped with atmospheric-jumping hyperdrives, shield-piercing energy emitters, and a dying population. And I possess the complete memory matrices of the Asgard High Council, the alchemical mastery of the System Lords, and the genetic key to wake every ship in this dockyard."

Sebek-Ra raised his glass in a polite toast.

"Help me take the city of Atlantis and its Stardrive, Commander... and within thirty days, your people will walk in tall, immortal bodies once more, and the Pegasus galaxy will have a management team that actually knows how to run an empire. What do you say? Shall we show Colonel Sheppard what happens when a god learns how to read an engineering manual?"

## CHAPTER ONE: The Polite Ultimatum

*Wherein a pickled eel turns out to be a decoy, and Atlantis receives the most courteous declaration of war in ten thousand years.*

Dr. Rodney McKay was having a wonderful Tuesday until the pickled snake in Vault Four dissolved into strawberry gelatin.

"I'm telling you, Jennifer, it's not strawberry gelatin, it's an inert polysaccharide protein matrix!" McKay shouted across the high-security xenobiology containment room, waving a molecular spectrometer at the cylindrical Asgard stasis jar while Dr. Jennifer Keller peered through the glass with a penlight. "Although, chemically speaking, whoever programmed the Asgard matter converter to synthesize the decoy did add trace amounts of artificial red dye number forty and ethyl methylphenylglycidate, which is literally artificial strawberry flavoring!"

Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard leaned against the doorframe of the lab with a half-eaten turkey sandwich in one hand, looking from McKay to the empty stasis jar where the Goa'uld symbiote Sebek-Ra had supposedly been floating for the last three weeks.

"Wait a second," Sheppard said, chewing thoughtfully. "Are you telling me the snake we pulled out of Lokor's neck on the bridge of the Naglfar--the one we've had four Marines guarding twenty-four hours a day--was a gummy worm?"

"Not a gummy worm! A biomimetic cellular phantom with a decaying thirty-day half-life!" McKay slammed his palm against his forehead and began pacing between the lab tables. "Idiot! How could I have missed this?! When the surgical stasis beam extracted the symbiote on the bridge, we never opened the jar because the Asgard zero-time field blocks deep-tissue DNA scans! We assumed Lokor was the only one playing three-dimensional chess in that ship!"

"Meaning what, Rodney?" Teyla asked, stepping into the lab beside Ronon, both of them still wearing their off-world tactical vests from morning training on the south pier.

"Meaning that while Lokor was using Sebek-Ra's symbiote to heal his DNA, the symbiote wasn't as lobotomized as Lokor thought!" McKay pulled up the Deck Four holographic logs from Veldara on the wall monitor. "Goa'uld have genetic memory in every cell of their bodies! If Sebek-Ra grew back his higher consciousness using Lokor's own neural pathways as a template, he would have realized weeks ago that Lokor was planning to ditch him! He must have transferred his real mind into one of the cloned symbiotes on Deck Four and beamed himself off the ship before we even blew up the laboratory!"

"Hold on," Ronon said, his dark eyes narrowing. "If the snake got away with all of Lokor's Asgard knowledge in its head... why did he pretend to be a loud idiot in a gold cape when we met him on Veldara?"

"Because what he left behind in Lokor's neck was just the loud idiot reflex loop!" McKay groaned. "The real Sebek-Ra--the one who spent six months absorbing thirty thousand years of Asgard science and curing himself of Goa'uld megalomania--left his annoying surface personality behind to keep both Lokor and us distracted while he walked out the back door!"

Before Sheppard could reply, the city-wide klaxon erupted across Atlantis--not the standard Wraith proximity alarm, but the high-priority deep-space subspace alert.

"Colonel Sheppard! Dr. McKay! Report to the Control Room immediately!" Richard Woolsey's voice came over the PA system, tight with an edge of alarm that made Sheppard drop the rest of his sandwich into a biohazard bin and sprint for the stairwell.

When First Recon burst into the main Control Room thirty seconds later, every technician on the floor was staring up at the main holographic projection screen.

"What do we have, Chuck?" Sheppard demanded, vaulting up the steps two at a time to join Woolsey and Dr. Zelenka on the central balcony.

"Long-range sensors at the edge of the Lantean system just picked up nine simultaneous hyperspace exits right outside our orbital moon's gravity well," Zelenka said, his hands trembling slightly as he adjusted the magnification on the tactical display. "Six of them are Vanir Asgard strike cruisers--the same angular hull class that attacked us during the Attero crisis, except their shield signatures have been upgraded by four hundred percent."

"And the other three?" McKay asked, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Zelenka swallowed hard. "Three fully operational Ancient Aurora-class battleships. And Rodney... look at their power signatures. Every single one of those Aurora hulls has been retrofitted with an Asgard neutrino-ion grid and weapons-grade naquadah capacitor banks."

In the center of the Gate Room floor below, the Atlantis holoprojector hummed to life on its own--bypassing Chuck's firewall with a single, effortless stroke of Lantean-Asgard root code.

A man materialized in full, crystal-clear three-dimensional projection at the foot of the stairs.

He was tall, human, and effortlessly aristocratic, with silver-streaked dark hair, a neatly trimmed goatee that would have made Ba'al nod in professional

appreciation, and a charcoal-black coat with a single gold-and-silver ouroboros pin on the lapel. He held a delicate crystal glass of amber brandy in his left hand, and when he looked up at the balcony, his dark eyes did not glow with theatrical cartoon fire--only a brief, subtle shimmer of liquid gold across the irises that vanished when he smiled.

"Good morning, Atlantis," Sebek-Ra said in a normal, rich baritone, raising his glass toward Woolsey and Sheppard. "Or is it still morning in this hemisphere? I confess, jumping across four sectors in a retrofitted Aurora dreadnought plays absolute havoc with one's circadian rhythm. Dr. McKay--I trust you enjoyed the strawberry gelatin?"

McKay gripped the balcony railing with both hands, his knuckles white. "You! You're Sebek-Ra! Where are your forty-foot holograms and your brass trumpets?!"

Sebek-Ra winced slightly, placing a hand over his heart in genuine embarrassment. "Oh, please, Doctor, do not remind me. Looking back on those six months I spent wedged inside Lokor's cervical spine with ninety percent of my prefrontal ganglia severed... it is like waking up from a six-month bender in ancient Memphis and discovering one has decorated one's yacht in velvet and paper-mâché cobras. Truly mortifying. You have no idea how liberating it is to possess a human prefrontal cortex enriched by thirty thousand years of Asgard analytical clarity."

"Yeah, well, the makeover looks great," Sheppard said coldly, resting his hands on the balcony rail. "You want to tell us why you just parked six Vanir cruisers and three Ancient battleships in our front yard, or are you here to return the gold leaf we scraped off my Jumper?"

"Actually, Colonel Sheppard, I am here to conduct a hostile corporate restructuring," Sebek-Ra replied pleasantly, taking a slow sip from his glass. "You see, for the past ten thousand years, this galaxy has suffered from a catastrophic lack of competent leadership. The Ancients were brilliant engineers who couldn't fight their way out of a wet paper bag. The Wraith are starving locusts. The Asurans were genocidal appliances. And you, my dear friends from Earth, are well-meaning tourists sitting in a flying city whose operating manual you have barely read past Chapter Two."

"And you think you're qualified to run the Pegasus galaxy?" Woolsey asked, stepping forward.

"Mr. Woolsey, in the twenty-one days since I left Veldara, I have cured the Vanir Asgard of their ten-thousand-year genetic degradation, united the three surviving Lantean Outcast dreadnought fleets of the Doranda sector, and wiped out

four Wraith Hive ships and the last Pegasus Replicator stealth-cruiser without losing a single hull plate," Sebek-Ra said softly. "I am not a screaming System Lord demanding that peasants bow in the mud. I am offering the Pegasus galaxy permanent peace, medical immortality, and an impenetrable planetary defense grid."

"At what price?" Teyla asked from the balcony.

Sebek-Ra looked at her with warm, almost sympathetic eyes. "Simply that humanity and the Vanir acknowledge the architect of their salvation. Think of how the Ori organized their galaxy, Lady Teyla--except without the dreary monastic robes, the burning of heretics, or the hypocrisy of pretending to be disembodied spirits. I am right here in the flesh. I provide real shields, real medicine, and real miracles. And right now, I require the city of Atlantis--specifically its Stardrive and its deep-submerged Lantean archive--to serve as the capital of our new order."

"And if we tell you to take your nine ships and go jump into a black hole?" Sheppard asked.

Sebek-Ra sighed, checking a sleek silver pocket watch that materialized into his palm via a micro-Asgard transporter. "Then, in precisely three minutes, my flagship Sol Invictus and her eight sister vessels will demonstrate what happens when Ancient drone arrays and Asgard plasma beams are tuned to the exact harmonic frequency of the Lantean city shield. Oh--one final administrative detail, Mr. Woolsey."

Sebek-Ra swirled the last drop of Lantean brandy in his crystal snifter. "I am well aware of your expedition's standard operating procedure when faced with overwhelming orbital superiority. Within the next ninety seconds, Dr. McKay will suggest dialing Earth to request a Mark IX gate-buster warhead or an extra Zero Point Module, while Colonel Sheppard will propose hiding a cloaked Puddle Jumper inside an asteroid with a brick of C-4 strapped to the landing gear."

On the balcony above, Sheppard slowly took his hand off the tactical deployment binder where he had literally just opened the tab labeled ASTEROID C-4 CONTINGENCY.

"Just to save us all some tedious repetition," Sebek-Ra continued with an affectionate, Ba'al-like smirk, "my six Vanir cruisers have already deployed an Asgard subspace jamming lattice around Lantea's magnetosphere. If you attempt to dial your Stargate--either outward to Earth or to any local Pegasus address--the subspace carrier wave will immediately redirect the wormhole into the corona of your system's primary star. Please do not open your Stargate unless you wish to fill this lovely tower with ten thousand tons of solar plasma."

"Wait--you can't redirect an outgoing Stargate wormhole mid-dial without a black hole or a solar flare along the line of sight!" McKay yelled over the railing,

offended on a deeply personal level. "Samantha Carter and I wrote the definitive thirty-page paper on relativistic wormhole jumping!"

"And a very cute paper it was, Dr. McKay," Sebek-Ra replied indulgently. "I read it in the Naglfar's copied database over breakfast. On page fourteen, however, you and Colonel Carter assumed that the subspace corridor between two gates is a fixed Euclidean geodesic. When one applies the Vanir's atmospheric-hyperdrive tensor equations to the ninth chevron buffer--a little trick Lokor and Janus's exiled cousins worked out ten millennia ago--curving an outgoing wormhole into a local star takes approximately four kilowatts of power and a pocket calculator. I'll send you the proof once you surrender. Do raise your shield before the three-minute mark, Colonel; I would hate to damage the stained glass in the tower before I move my desk in. Good day."

"He called my paper 'cute,'" McKay whispered, his left eye twitching violently as the hologram vanished. "Sheppard, did you hear that?! He stood in my Gate Room, wearing a bespoke suit, drinking stolen Lantean brandy, and called the Carter-McKay Relativistic Geodesic Theorem cute!"

"Wait a minute," Sheppard said, walking down the spiral stairs from the Control Room balcony to stand on the spot where Sebek-Ra's hologram had just vanished. "Before we all panic about nine capital ships and a sun-redirected Stargate, let's look at what he actually did here. If Sebek-Ra has six Vanir strike cruisers and three retrofitted Aurora battleships, why did he give us a three-minute warning to raise our shield?"

"Because he's still a Goa'uld at heart, and Goa'uld love dramatic countdowns!" McKay shouted down from the DHD station.

"No," Teyla said thoughtfully, descending the stairs to join Sheppard and Ronon. "You heard his voice, Rodney. There was no theatrical madness in him. When he spoke of the six months he spent in Lokor's body on Veldara, he was genuinely embarrassed by how his damaged symbiote had behaved. A warrior who apologizes for his past clumsiness does not give his enemy three minutes out of vanity."

"He wanted our shield up," Ronon said immediately, his instincts cutting straight through the technical jargon. "If he shoots an unshielded city with nine ships, he blows up whatever he came here to get."

Sheppard snapped his fingers, pointing at Ronon. "Exactly! Look at what he said in his speech: 'I require the city of Atlantis--specifically its Stardrive and its deep-submerged Lantean archive.' If he fires a single unbuffered Aurora drone salvo or Vanir plasma beam into an unshielded tower, he risks setting off a sympathetic overload in our ZPM or cracking the city's hull plates and sinking the Stardrive to

the bottom of the ocean!"

"Whereas if our city shield is raised at full power," McKay said slowly, his eyes widening as he ran the energy-transfer equations in his head, "the shield dome acts as a giant shock absorber! He can apply controlled, surgical harmonic pressure against the dome to drain our ZPM down to zero--or force an automated safety shutdown of our main control systems--while keeping the physical buildings inside the dome completely intact!"

"Or," Zelenka called out from the upper sensor console, adjusting his glasses as he stared at the orbital formation lock, "he wants the shield dome raised because an active Lantean city shield creates a massive sub-harmonic blind spot across our passive sonar and deep-crust seismic arrays! Look at the formation of the three Aurora battleships: Hyperion and Themis are positioned over our northern and eastern piers, but the flagship Sol Invictus is holding station twelve kilometers southwest of the outer breakwater!"

"Right over the continental fault line," Woolsey murmured, joining Zelenka at the rail. "Colonel Sheppard, if Sebek-Ra has united the Vanir and the Doranda Outcast fleets, and he already knows every standard tactical play in our manual from reading the Naglfar's copied database... how do we break a nine-ship siege with no Stargate and no Daedalus?"

"By using the one ship in this solar system that Sebek-Ra thinks is currently sitting in drydock with its brain unplugged," Sheppard said, looking up toward the high lunar orbit indicator where the salvaged Naglfar was drifting. "Rodney--when you and Radek pulled the primary optical stones out of Deck Two of the Naglfar yesterday to clean out the herring brine, where did you put the stones?"

McKay blinked. "They're in the ultrasonic cleaning bath in Lab Six! Why?"

"Go grab them!" Sheppard ordered. "Teyla, Ronon, meet us in the submerged Jumper bay in ninety seconds with full boarding kit and every brick of C-4 in the armory!"

"Wait--you told Sebek-Ra we weren't doing the C-4 contingency!" McKay protested as he hurried toward the lab corridor.

"I took my hand off the binder, Rodney, I didn't promise anything!"

As Sheppard, Teyla, and Ronon headed for the armory, Richard Woolsey stood at the central command console watching the nine golden warship icons lock into their orbital siege positions.

"Dr. Zelenka," Woolsey said quietly, adjusting his tie with the practiced calm

of a man who had once audited Pentagon black-budget committees and found alien warlords only marginally less reasonable, "assuming Colonel Sheppard's plan to reactivate the Naglfar takes forty minutes, what is our secondary defensive option here in the city?"

"Well, normally I would suggest firing our remaining stock of thirty-two Atlantis drones up through the shield aperture to knock out one of the Vanir cruisers," Zelenka said, wiping his glasses with his shirttail. "Unfortunately, because Sebek-Ra possesses Praetor-level Lantean override codes from the Doranda Outcast shipyards and Lokor's Asgard jamming algorithms, the moment our drones leave the shield dome, his ships can simply broadcast a Lantean stand-down carrier wave and turn our own drones off in midair."

"Turn our drones off," Woolsey repeated flatly. "Like a television remote."

"More like a universal garage-door opener, yes," Zelenka sighed. "Which means until Colonel Sheppard and Rodney disrupt their shared targeting network from orbit, our entire offensive capability consists of harsh language and throwing rocks."

"Then let us hope Dr. McKay remembers all the words to his Goa'uld impression," Woolsey murmured.

"Calm down, Rodney, we'll put 'He insulted your math' right at the top of the court-martial charges after we shoot him," Sheppard said, turning to Woolsey and Zelenka as the first deep-space proximity klaxons began to wail. "Radek, verify what he just said about the Stargate."

Zelenka typed furiously at the DHD diagnostic station and paled. "He's telling the truth. The Vanir ships have projected a localized subspace gravitational lens right across our dialing vector. If we dial out, the wormhole jumps straight into the Lantean sun."

## CHAPTER TWO: The Siege of the Nine Suns

*Wherein the Gilded Armada opens fire, and Dr. McKay discovers that an opponent who knows his math is deeply unfair.*

"Raise the city shield! Maximum power from the ZPM!" Woolsey barked the instant Zelenka confirmed the gate lockout.

"Raising shield now!" Chuck slammed his hand onto the primary Lantean activation crystal. Outside the tall stained-glass windows of the control tower, the shimmering blue-green dome of the Atlantis city shield surged upward from the ocean surface, locking into a seamless hemisphere miles above the central spire.

Up in high orbit--where the salvaged Asgard science vessel Naglfar had been parked in unmanned maintenance standby while Zelenka's team stripped out its Goa'uld booby traps--the nine warships of Sebek-Ra's armada moved into a geometric hexagonal lattice.

"Rodney, can we remote-pilot the Naglfar from here to hit them from behind?" Sheppard asked, leaning over McKay's shoulder at the tactical console.

"No, because Zelenka and I disconnected the Naglfar's primary optical core yesterday to clean out the four hundred gallons of pickled herring brine that leaked into the lower cooling ducts!" McKay yelled, his fingers flying across the shield harmonic sliders. "Right now the Naglfar is sitting up there on auxiliary parking thrusters with its shields in standby mode, and--oh, look, he's not even shooting at the Naglfar, he just tractored it aside like a parked Honda so it wouldn't scratch its paint!"

High above the clouds, the sky over Lantea turned the color of molten brass.

All six Vanir cruisers and the three massive Aurora-class dreadnoughts opened fire simultaneously.

It was not the ragged, brute-force plasma bombardment of a Wraith Hive fleet, nor the relentless single-beam drill of the Asuran satellite. The three Aurora battleships launched a coordinated swarm of six thousand Ancient drones--each drone plated in superconducting naquadah-gold alloy and linked via an Asgard tactical targeting net--while the six Vanir cruisers fired synchronized, phase-modulated golden ion beams straight into the exact nodal intersections where the drones struck the Atlantis shield dome.

The impact shook the entire city on its ocean foundations like a Richter-eight earthquake.

Sparks erupted from two auxiliary consoles at the back of the Control Room as the overhead lights flickered violently.

"What the hell was that?!" Sheppard shouted, grabbing the balcony rail as a second synchronized salvo of golden beams and phase-linked drones hammered the exact same thirty-meter patch of the upper shield dome.

"He's not trying to drain our ZPM through brute force!" McKay stared in horror at the shield integrity graph, where localized harmonic stress fractures were already spiderwebbing across Sector Four of the dome. "An Ancient city shield works by dispersing incoming kinetic and energy impacts across the entire surface area of

the dome! Only someone who knows both the Ancient ZPM recharge cycle and Asgard phase-harmonic constructive interference could time nine separate warships to hit the exact same microsecond node before the shield can redistribute the load!"

"How long can the shield hold against that?!" Woolsey demanded.

"Against a normal Wraith fleet of ten Hives? Days!" McKay shouted back. "Against Sebek-Ra using Asgard-timed constructive harmonic resonance to punch a three-meter hole through the top of the dome? Forty minutes! Maybe fifty if I continuously randomize the ZPM phase variance by hand--except every time I shift the phase variance, his Asgard quantum sensors read my new frequency in zero point four seconds and adjust the next salvo in mid-flight!"

Over the open audio comm channel, Sebek-Ra's calm, conversational voice crackled through the Control Room speakers.

"A clever third-order Fourier inversion on that last frequency shift, Dr. McKay," Sebek-Ra remarked approvingly, as if coaching a promising graduate student over tea. "Using a prime-number harmonic step to mask the capacitor lag on Pier Three was genuinely inspired. Unfortunately, Lokor's memory database includes the complete mathematical proof showing why prime-number stepping fails at the seventeenth iteration under a tri-axial ion load. You might want to brace your coffee mug in three, two, one--"

CRACK-BOOM!

The seventeenth salvo struck the exact phase-transition seam above Pier Three. Down on the lower levels of the city, an auxiliary power conduit blew out in a shower of blue sparks, dropping the city's internal lighting to emergency amber for four seconds before Zelenka routed backup naquadah generators online.

Twenty minutes into the bombardment, the sound inside the Atlantis Control Tower was like standing inside the bell of a cathedral while someone hit it with a wrecking ball every twelve seconds.

Down in the primary ZPM room beneath the central tower, McKay and Sheppard stood on the triangular grated catwalk overlooking the three housing slots--where Atlantis's single active Zero Point Module blazed like a miniature trapped sun inside its containment cylinder, whining at a pitch so high it made their teeth ache.

"Look at the entropy shear on the crystalline lattice!" McKay shouted over the turbine-like scream of the ZPM, holding his tablet up to the glowing orange crystal. "Because Sebek-Ra is timing his nine-ship salvos to hit the exact harmonic rebound

wave of our shield emitters, he's creating a back-pressure surge in the subspace tap! Wait--wait a second! Why is the seismic harmonic on the South Pier reading three percent higher than the North Pier?!"

Sheppard frowned, leaning over the tablet screen. "Because the ocean floor slopes down toward the southern continental trench?"

"No, I compensated for bathymetric depth when we landed the city on M35-117!" McKay zoomed in on the lower-frequency acoustic return passing through the water beneath the city's hull. "That's not shield rebound! One of the ships in orbit--the center Aurora flagship--is running a secondary, low-frequency quantum carrier beam straight down into the ocean twelve kilometers southwest of us! Right now, it's masked by the acoustic roar of the bombardment!"

"He's critiquing my math while he digs in our backyard!" McKay shrieked, his face turning crimson. "Radek, over the intercom--take the shield randomization sliders and step the frequency through irrational transcendental curves! We have a working Asgard science vessel sitting in high orbit right behind his fleet! If we take Jumper One through the submerged ventral bay, cloak-climb through the gap in his orbital sensor grid, and board the Naglfar manually..."

While McKay raced down to Lab Six to retrieve the Naglfar's primary optical stones from the ultrasonic bath, Sheppard, Teyla, and Ronon sprinted through the lower east-pier corridors as the first five synchronized salvos from the Gilded Armada slammed into the shield dome overhead.

Even three hundred feet below the central spire, the concussions were terrifying. The ancient Lantean trinium bulkheads--designed to withstand the crushing pressure of miles of ocean water--groaned like the ribs of an old wooden galleon in a typhoon. Dust and crystallized salt from ten thousand years ago rained down from the ceiling seams, and every fluorescent strip-light along the passageway flickered between blinding white and emergency red.

In the main corridor outside the armory, two young civilian xenobotanists from Dr. Parrish's team were struggling to seal a warped manual pressure door whose hydraulic actuator had jammed during the third harmonic strike.

Ronon didn't even break stride. He braced his boot against the bulkhead, grabbed the steel locking wheel with both hands, and wrenched the jammed valve ninety degrees with a screech of protesting metal, sealing the pressure door tight.

"Stay in the inner core sectors until the bombardment stops!" Teyla told the two scientists calmly before she and Ronon followed Sheppard into the armory vault.

Inside, Master Sergeant Bates's replacement armorer was already tossing four heavy olive-drab Canvas packs loaded with P-90 magazines, Lantean stun-disruptors, and shaped C-4 charges across the counter.

"Colonel," the sergeant said, bracing himself against the weapon racks as another thunderous CLANG-THOOM echoed through the city's foundation, "Dr. Zelenka just called down on the hardline. He says the golden drones those Aurora ships are firing aren't standard Lantean squid-drones. When they hit the shield dome, they don't detonate and vanish--they flatten out against the energy membrane like magnetic limpet mines and act as harmonic tuning forks for the Vanir ion beams!"

"Tuning forks," Sheppard repeated grimly, slinging two packs over his shoulders. "So every drone that sticks to the dome makes the next beam hit twice as hard."

"And if we don't knock those ships out of synchronization in thirty minutes, the whole top third of the shield is going to shatter like a wineglass when an opera singer hits high C," McKay panted, skidding into the armory doorway cradling a foam-lined plastic tub full of dripping-wet, glowing blue Asgard optical stones wrapped in paper towels. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to run down twelve flights of stairs carrying forty priceless Asgard quantum crystals while a refurbished Goa'uld is using Fourier calculus to shake the staircase?!"

"Did you drop any of them?" Sheppard asked, leading the way out of the armory toward the vertical turbolift leading down to the submerged ventral Jumper bay.

"Of course I didn't drop any of them! Although Stone Seven--which controls the Naglfar's waste-recycling matter converter--still smells faintly of pickled herring and lemon dish soap, so I strongly advise against ordering any snacks once we get aboard!"

Down in the dark, cavernous ventral launch bay--originally designed by the Ancients to launch submersibles when Atlantis sat on the ocean floor--Puddle Jumper One sat suspended on the magnetic cradle above the shimmering blue water-lock membrane.

As the four of them piled into the cabin and strapped in, one more massive golden beam struck the upper dome directly above the central tower, sending a violent pressure wave down through the ocean that made the water beneath the Jumper's floor lock surge three feet upward before the containment field pushed it back.

"Releasing magnetic clamps," Sheppard said, his hands steady on the controls as the cradle dropped them straight into the pitch-black water beneath the city's belly.

Beneath the city of Atlantis, four hundred feet down in the pitch-black water of the Lantean ocean, Puddle Jumper One glided silently outward along the continental shelf with its Ancient cloak engaged.

Outside the viewport, the bioluminescent deep-sea flora of M35-117 pulsed in eerie waves of electric blue every time a golden plasma salvo struck the top of the shield dome miles above.

"Watch the sonar return at two o'clock, John," Teyla said from the co-pilot's station, pointing at a massive, eighty-foot thermal shadow moving through the kelp forest below their port drive pod. "The acoustic shockwaves from the orbital bombardment have agitated the deep-trench marine predators."

"Great, sixty-ton Lantean sea-serpents on top of nine alien battleships," McKay groaned from the rear bench, holding his plastic tub of wet Asgard stones tightly between his knees. "Please do not bump into the wildlife, Sheppard! If we crack a drive nacelle four hundred feet underwater while the Stargate is locked out, we'll spend the rest of the siege waiting for Zelenka to lower a very long rope!"

"Relax, Rodney, the cloak masks our electrical field in the water too," Sheppard said, easing the Jumper smoothly over the dorsal ridge of the massive marine predator and angling the nose upward at forty-five degrees as they reached the outer edge of the boiling waterspout perimeter. "Hang on to your tub--we're breaching the surface in three, two, one!"

"We can hot-wire the Naglfar's time-dilation core and turn his own Asgard ship against his fleet," Sheppard finished, his eyes lighting up. "Wait--didn't you say the Naglfar's backup core still had Goa'uld voice-activated command encryption?"

McKay winced. "I'll explain on the way to the Jumper bay. Bring throat lozenges."

### CHAPTER THREE: To Speak Like a Snake

*Wherein Puddle Jumper One rides a hurricane into orbit, and Colonel Sheppard and Dr. McKay audition for the role of Supreme System Lord.*

Launching a Puddle Jumper from the submerged ventral bay while the ocean above Atlantis was boiling under a nine-ship orbital bombardment was like flying a submarine through the spin cycle of a washing machine.

Sheppard held the yokes steady as Jumper One--now stripped of its exterior twenty-four-karat gold plating, though Zelenka's prized Asgard bass subwoofer was

still bolted firmly beneath the pilot's seat--shot out through the lower shield aperture three hundred feet beneath the churning waves, engaged its Ancient cloak, and angled straight up through the eye of the artificial waterspout created by the shield's thermal bleed.

Above them, the sky was a lattice of crisscrossing golden plasma beams and screaming swarms of naquadah-plated drones.

"Okay, talk to me about this voice-lock on the Naglfar's backup core, Rodney," Sheppard said, banking hard at seven Gs to slip through the subspace wake of a Vanir strike cruiser as they broke into the upper mesosphere.

In the co-pilot's chair, McKay was furiously wiring a vocal synthesizer patch from his tablet into the Jumper's comm headset. "When we captured the Naglfar three weeks ago, Zelenka and I pulled the primary optical stones out of Deck Two to scrub out the Goa'uld malware. What we didn't realize until yesterday is that the backup combat computer on the bridge--the one that controls the ion cannons, the molecular transporters, and the time-dilation projector--has a secondary biometric security protocol that Sebek-Ra hard-coded into the ship before Veldara!"

"Can't we just use my Ancient gene or your Asgard root crystal?" Sheppard asked.

"The hardware requires the Ancient gene on the stones, yes, simultaneously with a verbal command spoken in classical High Goa'uld dialect at a minimum theatrical bass resonance of ninety-five decibels and an arrogance quotient of at least eighty-eight percent!" McKay held up his tablet screen, showing a real-time acoustic waveform analyzer. "The computer literally has an algorithmic ego-meter! If you sound calm, polite, or rational when you give a firing order, the backup core assumes you're an Asgard prisoner staging a mutiny and locks down the weapons!"

From the rear bench, Ronon stared at McKay. "An ego-meter."

"Then Rodney should have no problem setting it off by just talking normally," Sheppard said.

"Very funny, hilarious, ha-ha," McKay snapped as the dark, drifting silhouette of the unmanned Naglfar loomed ahead of them at the edge of the lunar Lagrange point, four hundred kilometers behind Sebek-Ra's three Aurora battleships. "Mine is rational scientific confidence based on measurable intellectual superiority! The ship wants theatrical, melodramatic, scenery-chewing System Lord megalomania!"

"Wait," Teyla said from the passive optical tracker. "John, there is a pair of automated Vanir sentry probes patrolling the debris corridor fifty kilometers ahead of the Naglfar's bow. If we fly within twenty kilometers of them with our cloak

active, their Asgard quantum sensors will detect our stealth displacement wave."

"Then we shut down every system on the Jumper--cloak, thrusters, life support, and HUD--five kilometers before we enter their sensor envelope, and coast past them on pure ballistic inertia pretending to be a chunk of hull debris from Pier Three," Sheppard said calmly, lining up the Jumper's trajectory vector with a drifting field of scorched Lantean metal plates.

"Coast past two Asgard quantum probes in a dead box with no thrusters," McKay whimpered, clutching his armrests as Sheppard pulled the overhead master circuit breaker.

Instantly, the cockpit plunged into icy darkness, tumbling lazily at five degrees per second alongside six ragged sheets of scorched pier plating. Through the frosted viewport, they watched in utter silence as the two bronze Vanir sentry probes drifted past less than four hundred meters away--scanning the cold trinium hull and moving on without firing a shot.

Ten seconds later, Sheppard snapped the master breaker back on inside the shadow of the Naglfar's open ventral docking bay, set the skids down on the silver deck, and popped the rear hatch.

The four of them sprinted up the silent stairwell to the Bridge.

"Teyla, Ronon, get to the starboard and port sensor pedestals and lock onto the shield emitters of those six Vanir cruisers," Sheppard ordered, dropping his palms onto the primary navigation stones while McKay plugged the bypass crystal into the auxiliary core slot. "Rodney, bring the main neutrino-ion reactor out of standby!"

"Slotting the crystal now!" McKay hit the activation rune.

The pedestal chimed in a harsh, metallic Goa'uld security prompt: "SECONDARY COMBAT CORE ENGAGED. VOICE BIOMETRIC AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED. SPEAK THY DIVINE MANDATE, O LORD OF THE SOLAR BARQUE, THAT THY SERVANTS MAY TREMBLE."

McKay cleared his throat, leaned down toward the pickup microphone, and said in a loud, nasal voice: "Yes, hello, I am the Great and Terrible Sebek-Ra, power up the primary shields and charge the time-dilation cannon immediately!"

The console buzzed with an angry red light. "AUTHENTICATION FAILED. VOCAL TIMBRE DETECTED: ANXIOUS ACADEMIC WITH SINUS CONGESTION. ARROGANCE QUOTIENT: FORTY-TWO PERCENT. WEAPONS REMAIN LOCKED."

"Anxious academic with sinus congestion?!" McKay sputtered in outrage. "The

humidity in the Jumper bay was seventy percent!"

"Step aside, Rodney," Sheppard said, flipping a switch on his tactical vest's radio to patch the Jumper's under-seat Asgard bass subwoofer into the bridge's local acoustic relay. Sheppard stood up straight on the dais, imagined every terrible B-movie villain he had ever watched at three in the morning on basic cable, and lowered his voice an octave into the microphone:

"KNEEL BEFORE MY GOLDEN WRATH, INSECTS OF THE STARS!" Sheppard boomed, the Jumper's subwoofer amplifying his baritone until the deck plates rattled under Teyla's boots. "UNLEASH THE WHITE FIRE OF OBLIVION UPON THE TRAITORS WHO DARE PARK IN MY ORBIT WITHOUT A VALID VISITOR PASS, OR I SHALL TURN THEIR BONES INTO FOOTSTOOLS!"

Every control stone on the pedestal flashed a brilliant, enthusiastic emerald green.

"VOICE AUTHENTICATION CONFIRMED: NINETY-NINE POINT FOUR PERCENT DIVINE MEGALOMANIA," the combat computer chimed happily. "WELCOME BACK, O SUPREME ARCHITECT OF FOOTSTOOLS. ALL WEAPONS, SHIELDS, AND TIME-DILATION PROJECTORS ONLINE."

While Jumper One tumbled silently in ballistic free-fall past the two Vanir sentry probes with all its power shut off, the four members of First Recon floated weightlessly against their five-point harnesses in the freezing, pitch-black cockpit.

Outside the frosted viewport, the battle over Lantea was a silent, terrifying light show.

From two hundred kilometers above the planet, they could see the entire curve of the Lantean ocean lit up from beneath by the blazing blue hemisphere of the Atlantis shield dome--and around that tiny blue jewel, the six thousand golden limpet-drones stuck to the outer membrane pulsed in synchronized waves every time the nine warships above unleashed their golden plasma lances.

In the dark co-pilot's seat, McKay's teeth chattered--partly from the rapidly dropping cabin temperature, and partly from sheer nerves as the second bronze Vanir sentry probe glided past less than three hundred meters off their port nacelle.

"You realize," McKay whispered so quietly his breath barely fogged the glass, "that if that probe's passive mass-detector notices that this particular chunk of 'pier debris' has four warm mammalian bodies and a tub of wet Asgard stones inside it, we don't even have shields up!"

"The Jumper's outer trinium hull blocks infrared thermal bleed for at least twelve minutes after power-down, Rodney," Sheppard whispered back in the dark, watching the probe's blue scanning beam sweep across the scorched metal plates tumbling beside them. "You told me that yourself when we hid from the Asuran cruiser in Year Three."

"Yes, well, in Year Three I wasn't sitting next to a guy who had read all my maintenance logs!" McKay hissed.

Behind them in the rear compartment, Ronon's voice rumbled softly in the dark. "Why didn't Sebek-Ra put a crew on the Naglfar when he showed up?"

"Because the Naglfar was parked in a powered-down maintenance orbit behind the moon with its primary optical stones removed," Teyla whispered, her dark eyes tracking the distant, shadowy hammer-prow of the Asgard science vessel looming ahead of their drift vector. "To Sebek-Ra's sensors, the Naglfar is merely an empty hull without a computer core. He could not know that Rodney had the primary stones sitting in a cleaning tub in his laboratory."

"And even if he thought we might try to board it," McKay added, tapping the foam-lined plastic tub strapped to his lap, "he knew the backup combat core on the bridge was still locked behind his ninety-five-decibel Goa'uld ego-meter! Which, frankly, is the most insulting security system in galactic history!"

"Three hundred meters to the Naglfar's ventral hangar opening," Sheppard murmured, his hand hovering half an inch below the overhead master circuit breaker as the massive silver belly of the Asgard ship swallowed the starlight above them. "Two hundred... one hundred... we're inside the bay shadow. Power coming on NOW!"

Sheppard slapped the breaker shut, engaged the cloak and repulsor skids in the same tenth of a second, and set the Jumper down on the Naglfar's deck with a gentle thump.

Before the cabin lights had even finished warming up, Ronon had the rear hatch open and was sprinting down the silver ramp with his blaster drawn, followed closely by Teyla, Sheppard, and McKay clutching his tub of wet optical stones.

They paused at the Deck Two junction so McKay could slam the forty cleaned primary stones back into the central crystalline pillar--restoring the ship's main power bus with a deep, resonant sapphire hum--before racing up the last flight of stairs to the Bridge to confront the vocal ego-meter.

When First Recon sprinted out of the Naglfar's ventral hangar bay and paused at the Deck Two junction so McKay could slot the forty cleaned optical stones back into

the central crystalline pillar, they discovered that Zelenka's salvage crew hadn't quite finished removing all of Sebek-Ra's old interior decorations.

The moment the fortieth blue stone clicked into the pillar and main power surged back through the ship, a six-foot holographic projection of Lokor's tiny grey body--still wearing the ridiculous golden pharaonic crown from Veldara--popped up beside the turbolift door and began singing a jaunty, synthesized Goa'uld drinking song about crushing the bones of the unbelievers.

Ronon didn't even blink; he drew his combat knife and casually reached behind the projector lens to sever the audio wire mid-verse, reducing the singing pharaoh to a silent, gesturing mime.

"Thank you," McKay panted, slamming the crystal access cover shut and wiping lemon dish-soap suds off his hands onto his vest. "I swear, if we ever catch Sebek-Ra alive, I'm going to lock him in a room with that hologram on repeat for a decade! Come on--the bridge lift is active!"

Teyla looked at Sheppard, her lips twitching slightly. "That was... remarkably convincing, John."

"I've been around Rodney for four years, I know what delusional self-importance sounds like," Sheppard said, dropping into the pilot's stance over the stones as the Naglfar's silver hull lit up with full Asgard shielding. "Hang on--we're diving into the fleet!"

## CHAPTER FOUR: War of the Ancients and the Aesir

*Wherein the Naglfar crashes a nine-ship siege, and Sebek-Ra demonstrates why he is more dangerous than the Replicators.*

Down in the Atlantis Control Room, the city shield integrity display ticked down past nineteen percent.

Through the cracked outer panes of the upper tower balcony, Woolsey and Zelenka could see individual golden plasma lances bleeding through the thinning blue membrane of the dome, sending geysers of superheated steam two hundred feet into the air where stray bolts struck the ocean between the piers.

"Four more synchronized salvos and the dome will collapse over the central spire!" Zelenka shouted over the roar of overloading transformers.

Then the clouds directly behind the six Vanir cruisers split open in a flash of silver-white light.

The Naglfar dropped out of a micro-hyperspace jump less than eight kilometers off the starboard bow of the lead Vanir warship.

Guided by Sheppard's hands on the Ancient-linked Asgard stones and Ronon's targeting locks on the tactical console, the Naglfar didn't fire at the Vanir cruisers' reinforced forward shields. Instead, Sheppard used the Naglfar's mass-transporter grid to beam forty metric tons of seawater straight from the Lantean ocean below and materialize it as a solid, frozen ice-wall directly in front of the three Aurora battleships' outbound drone stream--detonating two thousand golden drones prematurely in space--while firing four concentrated ion-plasma salvos across the dorsal hyperdrive fins of the two nearest Vanir cruisers!

"Yes! Direct hit on Vanir Two and Vanir Four!" McKay cheered from the Naglfar's engineering stone matrix as the two struck Vanir cruisers spun out of formation, breaking the nine-ship harmonic synchronization lattice that had been drilling into the Atlantis shield. "Without all nine ships firing in locked phase harmony, the Atlantis shield dome can disperse the remaining impacts! We just bought the city at least an hour!"

As Sheppard slid his palms across the glowing Asgard navigation stones, the three-hundred-meter silver starship rolled ninety degrees on its longitudinal axis, skimming less than fifty meters above the dorsal hull of the third Vanir cruiser while Ronon tracked a pursuing ribbon of eight hundred drones from the Themis and detonated them inside the battleship's own armored trench with a tight flak burst from the replicator-disruptor cannons.

On the bridge of the flagship Aurora-class dreadnought Sol Invictus, forty kilometers away, Sebek-Ra stood calmly before the Lantean master control console, watching the holographic display as the Naglfar executed a high-G corkscrew roll between two Vanir cruisers.

Beside him, Vanir Commander Vafthrudnir scowled inside his bronze armor. "Colonel Sheppard's team has reactivated the Naglfar's backup combat core. Shall I detach three cruisers to destroy it?"

"Destroy my favorite laboratory ship? Certainly not," Sebek-Ra said mildly, setting his brandy glass down on the crystal console and resting his fingertips lightly on the Lantean neural interface. "Besides, Commander, you are thinking like a soldier fighting a tactical skirmish. Ask yourself: why did Colonel Sheppard only bring four people aboard a three-hundred-meter starship? Because the Naglfar is automated. And an automated ship running on my old backup Goa'uld firmware has a very predictable blind spot."

Sebek-Ra tapped a three-symbol Lantean code onto the console while speaking a single, quiet mathematical cipher in ancient Asgard runic.

Across the void, aboard the Naglfar, every console on the bridge suddenly flashed violent amber.

"Wait--what is he doing?!" McKay yelled, his hands flying frantically over the optical stones as a high-energy carrier beam lanced out from the prow of the Sol Invictus and locked directly onto the Naglfar's external communications array. "He's not firing weapons at us--he's broadcasting a root-level Asgard-Lantean polymorphic worm straight through our sensor dish! It's rewriting the Naglfar's matter-converter subroutines faster than the Pegasus Replicators could ever code!"

"Cut the dish!" Sheppard barked, banking the ship hard to port as all three two-kilometer Aurora battleships pivoted on their axes to face the Naglfar.

"I severed the dish, but the worm already triggered an internal replication loop inside the ship's automated repair drones!" McKay pointed toward the rear bridge doors, where a dozen spider-like Asgard maintenance drones--their silver shells suddenly glowing with golden Lantean-Goa'uld circuit patterns--were crawling out of the ventilation ducts and welding the bridge blast doors shut while draining power directly from the shield capacitors!

Ronon whipped up his particle magnum and vaporized two of the corrupted repair drones as they dropped from the ceiling above Teyla's head, while Teyla swept three more off the starboard console with a charged Asgard shock-rod.

"He turned our own maintenance drones into quasi-Replicators with a single radio burst!" McKay shouted, ducking as a golden plasma lance from the Sol Invictus slammed into the Naglfar's weakened port shield, sending a shower of crystalline sparks across the bridge. "Our shields are down to thirty-two percent!"

"Colonel Sheppard," Sebek-Ra's smooth, unhurried voice came over the bridge speakers, bypassing the ego-meter entirely. "I must applaud your vocal performance earlier--'Architect of Footstools' had a genuinely classic First Dynasty ring to it. However, your shields are failing, your repair drones are disassembling your hyperdrive coils, and in ninety seconds I will have no choice at all but to reduce the Naglfar to molten trinium. Alternatively, I am prepared to offer you and your team safe passage back to the surface if you allow my flagship to complete a brief, ten-minute salvage scan of the Lantean ocean floor."

Sheppard froze, his eyes narrowing as he exchanged a sharp look with McKay and Teyla.

During the first six minutes after the Naglfar leaped into the rear of Sebek-Ra's formation and shattered the nine-ship harmonic lattice, Sheppard flew the three-hundred-meter Asgard vessel with the reckless, improvisational audacity that had made him a legend in two galaxies.

When the lead Aurora battleship--the Hyperion--attempted to bracket the Naglfar between two crossing walls of golden drones, Sheppard didn't try to outrun them. Instead, he used the Naglfar's Asgard tractor beam to grab the crippled Vanir Fourth Cruiser by its dorsal fin and physically swung the hundred-meter Vanir warship like a medieval buckler right into the path of the Hyperion's drone swarm!

"Did you just use an Asgard cruiser as a flyswatter?!" McKay yelled, bracing both hands against the engineering stone pedestal as the Hyperion's drones hammered harmlessly against their own ally's shields.

"Hey, they parked in my firing lane!" Sheppard shot back, sliding his right hand across the transporter stones to beam a twenty-ton boulder of lunar basalt from the moon's surface and materialize it three meters in front of the fifth Vanir cruiser's forward sensor array--forcing the Vanir pilot to wrench his helm hard to port and collide glancingly with his sister ship's wingtip.

"Teyla, how is the Atlantis shield holding up down there?!" Sheppard called out.

Teyla checked the telemetry link from Zelenka's console in the city below. "With four of the Vanir cruisers knocked out of alignment and the Hyperion's drone bays disrupted, the harmonic resonance against the city dome has collapsed! Radek says our ZPM has stabilized at twenty-four percent and the shield dome is holding firm!"

"Great! Now let's see if we can knock out the flagship's main--" Sheppard started.

That was the exact moment Sebek-Ra stopped playing defense on the bridge of the Sol Invictus and fired the polymorphic Asgard-Lantean computer virus straight into the Naglfar's dorsal communication spire.

Within ten seconds, the Naglfar's own internal maintenance network turned into a nightmare.

Not only did the spider-like Asgard repair drones begin pouring out of the ceiling ducts with glowing gold optics, but the ship's automated matter-converter outlets along the bridge walls--the same dispensers that had once produced roasted pheasants--began rapidly synthesizing heavy golden trinium clamps that tried to physically weld Sheppard's and McKay's boots to the deck plates!

"He's telling the ship's floor to eat my shoes!" McKay shrieked, yanking his left foot out of a half-materialized golden ankle-shackle while Ronon blasted the wall dispenser into slag with a single crimson shot from his magnum. "Look at the code structure scrolling across the stones--it's a hybrid of Asuran nanite replication syntax and Asgard diagnostic machine code! Only someone who has examined both the Pegasus Replicator base code and Lokor's High Council operating system could write a virus like this on the fly!"

"Can we purge the computer core?!" Teyla asked, driving her shock-rod through the carapace of a repair spider that had just leaped onto the navigation pedestal.

"If I purge the primary core right now, we lose shields and drop into the ocean like a three-hundred-meter silver brick!" McKay yelled back--just before Sebek-Ra's calm, courteous voice came over the bridge speakers to offer them safe passage if they let him finish his 'ten-minute salvage scan of the Lantean ocean floor.'

And when McKay pulled up the deep-core seismic plot showing the Sol Invictus's quantum tractor beam boring four miles into the abyssal fault trench twelve kilometers southwest of Atlantis, the entire tactical picture inverted in an instant.

Aboard the flagship Sol Invictus, while the polymorphic virus wreaked havoc inside the Naglfar's maintenance ducts across the void, Vanir Commander Vafthrudnir watched Sebek-Ra with a mixture of grudging respect and deep unease.

"You could have destroyed that science vessel with a single concentrated drone salvo the moment its shields dropped below forty percent," Vafthrudnir observed, his small grey hands resting on the rim of the tactical holotable. "Why toy with Colonel Sheppard on the radio?"

"Because, my dear Vafthrudnir, Colonel Sheppard is the most dangerous kind of organism in the universe: an improvisational optimist with nothing left to lose," Sebek-Ra replied calmly, watching the deep-crust quantum excavator beam on the secondary monitor reach ninety-six percent extraction depth four miles beneath the Lantean seabed. "If I destroy the Naglfar outright while they still have forty seconds of maneuvering power, Sheppard will simply ram the burning wreckage straight into our ventral excavator array. By offering him a ten-minute ultimatum and letting him believe he has uncovered my secret plan slightly too late, I guarantee that he will spend the next two minutes attempting a clever technical countermeasure rather than a crude kinetic collision."

Vafthrudnir tilted his helmeted head. "And what if his clever technical countermeasure actually works?"

Sebek-Ra glanced at the secondary monitor, where a single green Lantean glyph flashed to confirm that the coral-encrusted stasis pod had just materialized safely inside the flagship's Auxiliary Stasis Vault on Deck Six.

A quiet, satisfied smile touched Sebek-Ra's lips.

"Then, Commander," Sebek-Ra murmured, "he will be doing me the greatest favor of my life."

"Wait a second," Sheppard muttered, covering the microphone with his palm. "Did he just say 'a ten-minute salvage scan of the Lantean ocean floor'?"

"Yes!" McKay's eyes went wide as he pulled up the directional sensor plot of the Sol Invictus's ventral arrays. "Sheppard! Look at where the flagship's main deep-penetration quantum beam has been pointed for the last twenty minutes! Twelve kilometers southwest of the city's outer pier--straight down through four miles of ocean water and two miles of continental bedrock into the abyssal fault trench! The nine-ship bombardment of the city shield wasn't an invasion to conquer Atlantis! He only hammered our shield dome so we'd pull 100% of our ZPM power inward to protect the city, leaving the deep-ocean perimeter sensors completely blind while he dug something out of the seabed!"

## CHAPTER FIVE: The Gambit of the Time-Dilation Core

*Wherein First Recon turns an Asgard starship into the galaxy's most expensive flashbang grenade, and a mystery rises from the abyss.*

"What is buried twelve kilometers southwest of Atlantis in the abyssal trench?!" Sheppard demanded, wrenching the Naglfar's helm hard to starboard as another volley of golden-plated Ancient drones screamed past their ventral hull.

"I don't know! We only moved the city to M35-117 a year ago after the Asuran attack!" McKay frantically cross-referenced the seismic coordinates with the ancient Lantean star charts stored in the Naglfar's memory core. "Wait--M35-117 wasn't just an empty ocean world that I picked off a list! Ten thousand years ago, before the final evacuation to Earth, the Lantean High Council maintained a classified deep-crust quarantine vault on this planet! That's why M35-117 was in the restricted sector of the database!"

"And Sebek-Ra found the vault coordinates in Lokor's stolen High Council files," Teyla realized, firing her sidearm to shatter another corrupted repair drone as it lunged for McKay's ankles. "Whatever is inside that deep-crust vault, he brought nine warships here just to extract it while we were pinned inside our shield!"

"Not if we break his fleet right now," Sheppard said, his jaw setting into a hard line as he looked at the three massive Aurora-class battleships hovering in a tight triangle around the deep-ocean tractor beam. "Rodney--the Naglfar still has its Asgard time-dilation generator intact in the ventral spine, right?"

"Yes, the one Lokor used to freeze six hundred Wraith Darts on Niflheim, why?" McKay asked warily.

"Because all nine of Sebek-Ra's ships are linked together by a shared Asgard-Lantean harmonic targeting network so they can synchronize their beams," Sheppard said rapidly. "What happens if we drop the Naglfar right into the center of their formation, hook our neutrino-ion core directly into the time-dilation projector, and detonate an inverted temporal-harmonic pulse across their shared network frequency?"

McKay stopped typing for two full seconds, staring at Sheppard with his mouth slightly open.

"Well," McKay said slowly, "if I set the time-dilation ratio to an oscillating negative phase wave instead of a static bubble, the temporal shear will travel down their targeting link like a fifty-gigawatt EMP! It won't blow up their hulls, which is good because blowing up three Aurora reactors in low orbit would boil half the ocean and cook Atlantis--but it will instantly fuse every Asgard shield emitter, hyperdrive relay, and drone control matrix across all nine ships at the same time!"

"What's the catch?" Ronon asked, blasting three more corrupted drones off the ceiling.

"The catch is that it will also fry every circuit on the Naglfar, and we have to be inside Jumper One clearing the ventral hangar bay at maximum cloak velocity at least four seconds before the capacitor hits critical, or we'll be frozen in a localized time-loop repeating the same four seconds of me yelling at Sheppard until the universe experiences heat death!"

"Four seconds is plenty of time," Sheppard said, already locking the Naglfar's helm onto a steep, unswerving collision vector straight into the center of the three Aurora battleships. "Rodney, set the overload sequence and give it one last voice command so the computer doesn't abort it!"

McKay jammed the final two optical stones together, grabbed the bridge microphone, and screamed at the top of his lungs in a surprisingly booming baritone: "BY THE GOLDEN BEARD OF SEBEK-RA, OVERLOAD THE TEMPORAL CORE TO ONE THOUSAND PERCENT AND DO NOT QUESTION MY SUPREME MATHEMATICAL GENIUS, YOU GLORIFIED CALCULATOR!"

"VOICE AUTHENTICATION CONFIRMED: ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR PERCENT ARROGANCE," the

computer chimed proudly. "TEMPORAL CORE OVERLOAD IN FORTY-FIVE SECONDS. ALL HAIL THE SUPREME MATHEMATICAL GENIUS."

"Forty-five seconds! Take the auxiliary Jefferies chute!" Sheppard yelled as a swarm of thirty golden-eyed repair spiders boiled out of the main lift shaft ahead of them, welding the primary corridor blast doors shut in a shower of white sparks.

Ronon kicked the hatch cover off the vertical service ladder, dropped twenty feet straight down to Deck Three without touching a rung, and immediately fired two blasts from his particle magnum that cleared a trio of corrupted sentry spheres blocking the hangar bay entrance.

Teyla, McKay, and Sheppard dropped down the shaft behind him--McKay landing on a pile of discarded golden curtain rods outside the airlock.

"Twenty-two seconds until temporal core inversion!" McKay shrieked, scrambling up and clutching his tablet as the walls of the ventral hangar bay began to shimmer with strange violet temporal distortion ripples. "The pre-detonation field is already causing localized micro-time-slips! My wristwatch is running backward and I just saw my own left boot step through the hatch half a second before I got here!"

"Stop looking at your boots and get in the Jumper!" Sheppard grabbed McKay by the back of his vest, hauled him up the rear ramp of Jumper One, and vaulted into the pilot's chair as the entire three-hundred-meter frame of the Naglfar groaned under the combined crossfire of three Aurora battleships and six Vanir cruisers.

Sheppard slammed the thrusters forward, shooting the cloaked Jumper out of the Naglfar's belly with three seconds to spare and diving straight toward the ocean below.

As the sapphire-and-violet temporal shockwave from the Naglfar's overloaded time-dilation core finished washing across high orbit, the silence that fell over the Lantean system was almost eerie.

Inside the cockpit of Puddle Jumper One, two kilometers below the drifting, burning hulk of the flagship Sol Invictus, the instruments took five full seconds to recover from the electromagnetic backwash.

Down on the ocean surface below them, the six thousand golden limpet-drones that had been clinging to the exterior of the Atlantis city shield dome lost their harmonic link simultaneously. Like a curtain of falling gold coins, all six thousand deactivated drones slid down the curved blue surface of the shield dome and splashed harmlessly into the sea.

Over the subspace radio, Dr. Radek Zelenka's voice burst through the static, backed by the distant sound of cheering technicians in the Atlantis Control Room.

"Jumper One! Colonel Sheppard, Rodney, do you read me?! The six Vanir cruisers have lost primary weapons and shields--they are opening unstable hyperspace windows and retreating out of the system! And the two flank Aurora battleships are completely dead in orbit! You did it!"

"Don't pop the champagne yet, Radek!" McKay barked into his headset, his eyes locked onto the sensor readout of the burning center dreadnought above them. "Look at the Sol Invictus! Yes, its sublight engines and drone launchers are fused, and yes, its main reactor is about to blow in eighteen minutes--but two seconds before our temporal wave hit, Sebek-Ra's ventral quantum transporter completed its extraction cycle from the abyssal trench!"

Sheppard craned his neck to look up through the top viewport at the two-kilometer bronze-and-silver flagship listing in the upper stratosphere. Secondary explosions were already rippling along its port engine nacelles, venting plumes of ionized plasma into the thin air.

"If Sebek-Ra spent three weeks building a nine-ship armada just to dig one thing out of the mud on M35-117," Sheppard said, pulling the Jumper's yokes back and firewalling the thrusters toward the Sol Invictus's smoking dorsal hangar bay, "there is no way in hell we're letting him walk off that ship with it."

When the Naglfar's negative-phase temporal wave washed across the nine-ship formation, the effect inside the six Vanir strike cruisers was pandemonium.

Because Vanir atmospheric-jumping hyperdrives relied on ultra-precise Asgard chronometric oscillators to calculate subspace entry windows, the oscillating negative time-wave threw every navigational clock in the Vanir squadron out of synchronization by seventeen milliseconds.

Alarms shrieked across the Vanir fleet channel as their forward shields dissolved into harmless purple static and their weapon capacitors grounded out into their own hull frames.

"Flagship Sol Invictus, this is Cruiser One!" Commander Vafthrudnir's voice crackled over the emergency subspace band as his ship pitched wildly in the upper mesosphere. "Our primary shield emitters and hyperdrive stabilizers are fused! The Tau'ri have detonated a temporal-shear device! We must break orbit on auxiliary sublight drives before Atlantis fires its city drones!"

On the bridge of the burning Sol Invictus, Sebek-Ra didn't even answer the hail

--because the real Sebek-Ra was already six decks below in the Stasis Vault, completing the final microsecond of his quantum-tunneling neural transfer into the sleeping brain of Praetor Aurelius.

Above them, right in the center of Sebek-Ra's nine-ship formation, the Naglfar vanished in a silent, expanding sphere of iridescent sapphire-and-violet temporal light.

The shockwave was unlike any explosion ever seen in Pegasus. There was no fire--only a shimmering ring of rippled spacetime that washed outward across all six Vanir strike cruisers and the three two-kilometer Aurora battleships. Every golden shield dome in the armada shattered like spun glass. Within thirty seconds, all six Vanir vessels broke formation and limped into unstable hyperspace jumps to escape, while in the center of the orbital debris field, the two unmanned Aurora battleships (Hyperion and Themis) drifted dead in space, and Sebek-Ra's flagship, the Sol Invictus, listed heavily to port as secondary electrical fires raged along its dorsal spine.

## CHAPTER SIX: Boarding the Sol Invictus

*Wherein Colonel Sheppard refuses to let a polite villain leave without checking his pockets, and Ronon tests his blaster against Outcast mercenaries.*

"Look at the flagship's ventral tractor array!" McKay shouted from the co-pilot's chair as Sheppard pulled Puddle Jumper One out of its dive two kilometers below the burning hull of the Sol Invictus. "Even with the temporal shockwave frying ninety percent of his primary systems, Sebek-Ra routed a dedicated auxiliary naquadah capacitor to the deep-ocean molecular transporter! He just finished beaming something up from the abyssal trench right before the Naglfar blew!"

"Did it go into the flagship's cargo bay?" Sheppard asked, pulling the yokes back and angling the cloaked Jumper straight up toward the scarred, two-kilometer bronze-and-silver belly of the Ancient Aurora-class dreadnought.

"Not the cargo bay--he beamed it directly into the Auxiliary Stasis Vault adjacent to the Secondary Bridge on Deck Six!" McKay tapped his sensor display rapidly. "Wait--the Sol Invictus's main sublight engines are overloading from the temporal feedback! The ship's automated Lantean damage-control system is initiating an emergency core dump, and the surviving Outcast mercenary crew are already launching in escape pods from the port blisters!"

"If the Sol Invictus is going down, Sebek-Ra is going to take whatever he just dug out of our ocean floor and jump off in a stealthed shuttle," Sheppard said grimly. "Atlantis Control, this is Jumper One! The Vanir cruisers have retreated and

the two unmanned Aurora hulls are dead in the water. We're boarding the Sol Invictus to secure whatever Sebek-Ra pulled out of that deep-crust vault before he escapes!"

Down in the Atlantis Control Room, Woolsey grabbed the microphone. "Colonel Sheppard, Dr. Zelenka says the flagship's reactor is experiencing an uncontained naquadah-capacitor cascade! You have less than eighteen minutes before that vessel breaks apart in upper atmosphere!"

"Eighteen minutes is practically a three-day weekend, Richard. Jumper One out!" Sheppard guided the cloaked Jumper straight through the smoking, unshielded aperture of the Sol Invictus's dorsal Puddle Jumper bay, setting down hard between two overturned Outcast cargo skiffs.

The rear hatch dropped before the landing skids had stopped smoking.

Outside in the cavernous Lantean hangar deck, chaos reigned. Groups of human Outcast mercenaries--descendants of the rogue Lantean fleet crews who had lived in the Doranda pocket-nebula for generations, armed with salvaged Ancient stun-rifles and crude naquadah grenades--were scrambling toward the life-pod corridors while alarms wailed in ancient Latin.

Four heavily armed Outcast guards guarding the inner blast doors spotted the team emerging from the cloaked Jumper and raised their rifles.

"Hold it!" the lead guard barked. "By order of Lord Sebek-Ra, the inner decks are--"

Ronon didn't let him finish the sentence. Flipping his particle magnum to wide-beam stun, the Satedan fired four rapid crimson pulses that dropped all four guards in their tracks before they could squeeze a trigger. Teyla darted forward, kicking their rifles aside and checking the Lantean corridor plaque above the archway.

"Look at the engineering on these rifles and power packs," McKay said, briefly kneeling beside one of the overturned skiffs to scan a sleek bronze-and-silver Lantean carbine modified with an Asgard optical sight and a liquid-naquadah magazine. "These Outcast crews aren't primitives who just found an old Aurora battleship drifting in a nebula! Their ancestors were the original Lantean naval engineers from the Doranda shipyard ten thousand years ago, and in just three weeks Sebek-Ra taught them how to mass-produce hybrid Ancient-Asgard-Goa'uld infantry weapons using the shipyard's matter converters!"

"Good thing we blew up their matter converters with the temporal pulse," Sheppard said, checking the hallway corners with his P-90 as they hurried out of the hangar deck into the main spinal corridor of Deck Six. "How much further to the

Auxiliary Stasis Vault?"

"Two hundred meters ahead, past the secondary officer quarters--wait!" McKay skidded to a halt in front of an open Lantean laboratory alcove halfway down the corridor, where a bank of holographic monitors was still flickering on emergency battery power.

Sheppard glanced inside the alcove. "Rodney, the ship is breaking up in fourteen minutes, we don't have time for sightseeing!"

"No, look at what Sebek-Ra was running on this laboratory terminal twenty minutes ago--right before the Naglfar hit his fleet!" McKay pointed a trembling finger at the central Lantean screen, where a three-dimensional map of the Sol Invictus's internal power grid was overlaid with a medical neural-transfer schematic. "That's an Asgard consciousness-transfer beam calibration log! Just like the one Lokor used on the Naglfar!"

Teyla stepped into the doorway beside Sheppard, frowning at the glowing Lantean script. "Was he preparing to transfer his mind into another clone body if the flagship was destroyed?"

"I can't tell--the target receptor coordinates were wiped when the temporal EMP hit the main bus, and the terminal's local crystal memory is half-melted from the power surge!" McKay pulled his universal optical drive from his vest and copied the fragmented log stub just as a massive conduit explosion further aft sent a rolling cloud of black smoke down the corridor. "All I can see is that twelve minutes before our EMP hit, Sebek-Ra routed a ninety-terawatt neural-transfer pulse from this alcove straight into the Auxiliary Stasis Vault at the end of the hall!"

As First Recon charged down the smoking spinal corridor of Deck Six aboard the dying Sol Invictus, the sheer scale of Sebek-Ra's ambition was visible in every open compartment they passed.

Unlike the gaudy, gold-plated theatricality of the Naglfar on Veldara--which had been the work of Sebek-Ra's damaged, brainstem-only reflex ego--the interior of the Sol Invictus had been retrofitted with cold, breathtaking architectural brilliance.

Along the ancient Lantean walls, clean silver ribs of Asgard optical crystal had been seamlessly integrated into the bronze Alteran power conduits, creating a hybrid technology that looked as if the Ancients and the Asgard had spent a century co-designing a warship at the height of the Four Great Races' alliance. In an open tactical mapping bay they sprinted past, a thirty-foot holographic projection showed not just the Pegasus galaxy, but the intergalactic void corridor between Pegasus and the Milky Way--with thirty-four precision hyperdrive relay coordinates plotted along

a parallel track to the McKay-Carter Intergalactic Gate Bridge!

"Wait--did you see that star map in the tactical bay?!" McKay gasped as they leaped over a buckled floor plate while secondary explosions rumbled through Deck Five below. "He wasn't just planning to conquer Pegasus! He already calculated an intergalactic hyperdrive corridor running parallel to the Midway station route straight to the Milky Way!"

"Why would he want to go back to the Milky Way when the Ori and the SGC are there?" Ronon asked, blasting a jammed Lantean security bulkhead open with a two-handed shot from his magnum.

"Because the Ori were wiped out when SG-1 used the Ark of Truth in the Ori galaxy, leaving millions of former Ori worshippers and dozens of orphaned Prior-driven warships scattered across the Milky Way without a god!" McKay shouted as they skidded to a halt outside the open laboratory alcove halfway down the hall. "Think about it! If Sebek-Ra showed up in the Milky Way commanding an armada of Lantean-Asgard warships--and possessing whatever ancient secret he just pulled out of that deep-ocean trench--he could step right into the power vacuum left by both the System Lords and the Ori!"

Halfway between the laboratory alcove and the Auxiliary Stasis Vault on Deck Six of the Sol Invictus, a squad of six surviving Outcast mercenaries burst out of a cross-corridor behind AR-1, pinned in the burning ship after the port escape-pod blisters jammed.

"They're trying to cut us off from the rear!" Teyla warned, spinning on her heel and dropping to one knee beside Ronon as the mercenaries opened fire with modified Lantean carbines.

Sheppard glanced up at the ceiling of the hexagonal corridor, where a thick silver Asgard fire-suppression conduit had been retrofitted alongside the Lantean light strips. "Rodney! Does this ship have the same automated halon-foam system Lokor had on the Naglfar?"

"Yes, Sebek-Ra used the exact same Asgard environmental template when he refitted the dockyard!" McKay yelled over the crackle of energy fire.

Sheppard aimed his P-90 straight up and put a five-round burst directly through the silver environmental sensor node above the mercenaries' heads.

Instantly, the ceiling vents ruptured in a pressurized torrent of sub-zero Asgard fire-suppressant foam, burying all six Outcast mercenaries in a ten-foot drift of rapidly solidifying white firefighting gel that froze their boots and

rifles in place without killing them.

"Nice shot," Ronon grunted, turning back toward the end of the corridor where the two armored Vanir guards stood waiting outside the Stasis Vault.

"I've had a lot of practice shooting ceiling fixtures lately," Sheppard said. "Come on!"

"Wait--if he routed a consciousness-transfer beam into the Stasis Vault twelve minutes ago," Sheppard said, a cold chill running down his spine as he started running again toward the end of the corridor, "he might have already tried to overwrite whoever is inside that deep-ocean cryo-pod!"

"Or the temporal EMP interrupted the transfer mid-stream and fried them both!" McKay panted, sprinting to keep up as the two heavily armored Vanir guards at the end of the hall stepped out in front of the vault doors and leveled their particle rifles.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: A Gentleman's Farewell

*Wherein Sebek-Ra shares a toast at the edge of annihilation, and First Recon comes face-to-face with a ten-thousand-year-old secret.*

"Down!" Sheppard tackled McKay behind an angled Lantean structural buttress just as the two Vanir guards unleashed a blistering stream of amber particle bolts that chewed deep, smoking gouges into the ancient trinium wall plates.

Across the corridor, Teyla and Ronon dove behind the opposite pillar. "Their personal shields are phase-modulated like the cruisers!" Teyla called out, ejecting the spent magazine of her P-90 and slapping in a fresh clip of armor-piercing rounds. "Our bullets and Ronon's stun setting are bouncing off their armor!"

"Because Vanir personal shields are tuned to block kinetic and high-energy particle impacts!" McKay yelled, pressing himself flat against the floor tiles as another volley of amber fire showered sparks over his head. "They're not tuned to block a localized Lantean gravitational plating inversion--except the gravity control crystal for this hallway is on the wall ten feet behind them!"

"I don't need a gravity crystal," Ronon growled.

Before Sheppard could stop him, Ronon holstered his blaster, grabbed a six-foot, four-hundred-pound Lantean bronze diagnostic console that had been torn loose by the hull tremors, and used it as a battering ram.

Charging straight into the stream of Vanir particle fire with the heavy bronze console held in front of his chest like a medieval siege shield, Ronon absorbed the searing impacts across the dense Lantean metal for the three seconds it took his boots to cross the twenty-foot gap--and slammed the four-hundred-pound console straight into both Vanir soldiers at full sprint, pinning them flat against the closed blast doors of the Stasis Vault.

Teyla was right behind him, sliding across the deck to jam two High-Output Lantean stun-disruptors directly into the unshielded neck seals of the Vanir helmets. Both armored figures went limp.

"Okay," Sheppard said, stepping out from behind the pillar and blowing smoke off the barrel of his P-90. "Remind me to put you in for a promotion, Ronon. Rodney--open the vault!"

McKay scrambled over the fallen console and slapped his hand against the door crystal. To his surprise, the lock wasn't encrypted.

The heavy Lantean doors slid smoothly apart with a quiet, welcoming chime.

Inside the circular stasis vault, the air was cool and untouched by the smoke filling the rest of the dying dreadnought. In the center of the room stood a tall, vertical Lantean cryogenic stasis pod--its outer casing crusted with ten thousand years of calcified deep-sea coral and black volcanic basalt from the abyssal trench, though its inner crystal window glowed with warm, golden Lantean life-support light.

To the left of the cryo-pod sat a compact, portable Asgard consciousness-transfer emitter mounted on a tripod of golden trinium--except its primary optical lens was cracked down the middle and smoking faintly from the temporal EMP shockwave that had just swept the ship.

And standing beside the stasis pod, calmly resting one hand on its coral-encrusted frame while holding his crystal brandy glass in the other, was Sebek-Ra.

"Freeze!" Sheppard, Ronon, and Teyla snapped their weapons up in unison, three laser sights converging squarely on the center of Caelen Vane's charcoal-black coat.

Sebek-Ra did not raise a hand shield. He didn't reach for a weapon. He simply smiled--that warm, infuriatingly civilized smile--and inclined his head.

"Colonel Sheppard. Lady Teyla. Mr. Dex. And Dr. McKay, right on schedule," Sebek-Ra said conversationally. "I must say, turning the Naglfar's time-dilation core into a negative-phase harmonic EMP was genuinely brilliant. Did Dr. McKay calculate the wave inversion, or was that one of your intuitive leaps, Colonel?"

"I see you brought Lokor's old mind-swapping machine to the party," Sheppard said coldly, nodding toward the smoking tripod while keeping his P-90 aimed squarely between Sebek-Ra's eyes. "Let me guess: you dug a living Ancient out of the ocean floor, beamed him in here, and were just about to download your snake-brain into his head when our temporal pulse blew out your lens."

For a fraction of a second, Sebek-Ra's gaze flicked toward the smoking, cracked Asgard emitter on the tripod, and his jaw tightened in what looked like genuine, bitter frustration before his smooth, civilized mask slid back into place.

"A regrettable piece of timing on your part, Colonel Sheppard," Sebek-Ra admitted with a soft sigh. "Do you have any idea how delicate an eighty-eight-percent ascended Lantean cerebral cortex is? One cannot simply shove a physical Goa'uld symbiote into the neck of an Ancient who stands on the threshold of ascension; the bio-electric synaptic energy of their brain incinerates a larval or adult symbiote in less than four seconds. Even Ra learned that lesson the hard way ten millennia ago."

When the heavy Lantean doors of the Auxiliary Stasis Vault slid apart behind the two stunned Vanir guards, the contrast between the burning, smoke-filled corridor outside and the serene, temperature-controlled chamber within was striking.

Sebek-Ra stood beside the coral-encrusted cryo-pod looking completely unbothered by the fact that the two-kilometer dreadnought around him was eleven minutes away from vaporizing itself.

"You know," Sheppard said, keeping his P-90 sighted squarely on the gold-and-silver ouroboros pin on Sebek-Ra's lapel as the team fanned out across the vault entrance, "for a guy who claims he's evolved past all that cheesy System Lord melodrama, waiting in a locked room at the end of a burning spaceship to gloat at the heroes is still pretty cliché."

Sebek-Ra smiled faintly, tilting his crystal glass so the amber Lantean brandy caught the golden light of the cryo-pod. "Is it gloating if one is actually waiting for the backup power bus to finish decoupling a ten-thousand-year-old cryogenic life-support loop, Colonel? Had I pulled the plug on Praetor Aurelius's pod three minutes ago when your temporal pulse struck the ship, the voltage spike would have stopped his heart. Unlike my predecessors in the Milky Way, I prefer not to break antique masterpieces out of impatience."

"Right, because you wanted to steal his body with that Asgard consciousness-transfer emitter sitting on the tripod over there," McKay said, pointing his scanner at the cracked, smoking optical lens on the tripod beside the pod. "Wait a second--

why didn't you just take a human host with the Ancient gene, like Caelen Vane here? You already have the Ancient gene in this body! You're operating Aurora battleships right now!"

"Caelen Vane's body possesses a standard human expression of the Alteran activation gene, Doctor," Sebek-Ra explained with the patient tone of a master watchmaker explaining a tourbillon to an apprentice. "It allows me to turn on lights, sit in chairs, and fire drones. It does not possess an eighty-eight-percent activated Lantean cerebral cortex, nor does it contain the ten-thousand-year classified architectural memory of the Lantean High Council's Chief Defense Praetor. A human with the gene is a janitor with a master key. Praetor Aurelius is the man who designed the building."

Inside the Stasis Vault, while McKay scanned the unbroken vacuum seal of Praetor Aurelius's cryo-pod, Caelen Vane--running seamlessly on Sebek-Ra's post-hypnotic personality imprint--watched First Recon with an expression of mild, almost nostalgic amusement.

"Tell me, Colonel Sheppard," the imprint of Sebek-Ra asked conversationally as the ship groaned around them, "have you ever wondered why the Ancients and the Asgard both failed in the end, despite possessing technology that could reshape stars?"

"Because they ran into bad guys who didn't play by the rules, and we weren't around yet to bail them out," Sheppard said, keeping his P-90 steady.

"No," Sebek-Ra said softly. "They failed because they separated knowledge from will. The Ancients had infinite knowledge and zero discipline--they left half-finished superweapons lying around two galaxies like children abandoning toys in a yard, and then retreated into ascension so they wouldn't have to clean up their own mess. The Asgard had infinite discipline and zero imagination--they bound themselves in so many rules and cloning loops that they forgot how to evolve. And my people, the Goa'uld, had infinite will to rule, and wasted it pretending to be bronze-age thunder gods."

He tapped his chest lightly over the gold-and-silver ouroboros pin.

"For the first time in the history of three galaxies, someone finally put all three pieces of the puzzle into a single mind. Even if I perish in the fire of this ship today, Colonel... now that you have seen what a unified mind can build in three weeks, how well do you think you'll sleep tonight?"

"Which is why you needed an Asgard consciousness-transfer beam to copy your mind into his brain electronically without a physical snake," McKay said, scanning the

cryo-pod's unbroken trinium-crystal vacuum seal with his handheld detector. "Except our negative-phase temporal pulse hit the Sol Invictus right while your emitter was warming up and shattered the focal crystal twelve seconds before the transfer sequence could penetrate the pod's internal shielding! The ten-thousand-year vacuum lock is one hundred percent intact, and the occupant's brainwave pattern is still in deep delta-phase cryogenic sleep!"

Sebek-Ra looked at McKay with a dry, rueful smile. "You always were an irritatingly thorough little man, Doctor. Twelve seconds. Had your temporal bomb detonated twelve seconds later, I would currently be standing before you in a body capable of moving stars with a thought."

## CHAPTER EIGHT: The Prisoner of the Abyss

*Wherein the secret of the M35-117 quarantine vault is revealed, and the Sol Invictus reaches critical mass.*

Sheppard's eyes darted from Sebek-Ra to the coral-crusted stasis pod. "Who is in that pod?"

Sebek-Ra tapped a knuckle lightly against the frosted crystal glass of the ancient cryo-chamber.

"Ten thousand years ago, during the final months of the Lantean-Wraith war, the High Council of Atlantis was divided," Sebek-Ra said, his voice dropping into the cadence of a historian recounting a tragedy he had personally witnessed through Lokor's ancient archives. "Most of the Ancients were resigned to retreating to Earth through the Stargate. A small rogue faction--led by the inventor Janus--secretly built the Attero device and the time-travel ships. Everyone in your database knows about Janus."

"Yes, yes, we've cleaned up at least four of Janus's messes already," McKay snapped, edging closer to the vault's primary control pedestal while keeping one eye on Sebek-Ra. "Who is in the box?!"

"The man whom even Janus considered too visionary--or too bold--to bring back to Earth," Sebek-Ra said softly, his dark eyes gleaming. "His name is Praetor Aurelius of Lantea--formerly Chief Architect of the Lantean Defense Grid and the highest-ranking neural-ascension researcher on the Council. When the Council voted to abandon Pegasus and submerge Atlantis, Aurelius refused to leave the human populations of this galaxy to be devoured by the Wraith. The Council placed him in deep stasis and buried his vault beneath six miles of ocean and tectonic rock on M35-117 so he could never interfere with their retreat."

Teyla stepped forward, her eyes fixed on the serene, noble face of the bearded man sleeping behind the frosted crystal of the pod. "Wait... you are saying this Ancient was imprisoned by his own people because he wished to stay and protect the humans of Pegasus?"

Suddenly, the entire deck beneath their feet lurched twenty degrees to port as a massive secondary explosion tore through Deck Five just below the vault. Flames and black smoke roared past the outer corridor doorway, and the ship's Lantean voice alarm chimed: "WARNING. CONTAINMENT FAILURE IN PRIMARY REACTOR CORE. STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE IN NINETY SECONDS."

"He's not bluffing about the reactor!" McKay yelled, looking down at his tablet. "The temporal pulse fused the emergency vent valves! This whole two-kilometer ship is going to vaporize in less than a minute and a half!"

"And the stasis pod is hard-wired into the room's floor grid!" Sebek-Ra noted calmly as golden sparks rained from the ceiling overhead. "Still, one must appreciate the irony of our situation, Colonel Sheppard. Five minutes ago, you were willing to sacrifice your lives to stop me from awakening Praetor Aurelius. Now, if you shoot me, it will take Dr. McKay at least three minutes to safely decouple Praetor Aurelius's cryo-pod from the Lantean power bus without killing the man inside--which means all five of us, plus the last living Lantean in Pegasus, will be reduced to ionized gas. Or..."

Sebek-Ra reached slowly toward the secondary release crystal on the side of the pod.

"...I can enter the release cipher I already decoded, free the pod for your Jumper's anti-gravity sled, and while you are busy hauling an eight-hundred-pound stasis pod back to your Puddle Jumper for the next ninety seconds, you will be far too occupied to pursue me to my secondary escape pod."

"You're not going to any escape pod, snake!" Ronon growled, lunging forward over the fallen console.

"Mr. Dex, please, do not be tedious," Sebek-Ra sighed, his fingers brushing the glowing Lantean release crystal on the side of the pod. "Watch the birdie."

At that exact instant, Sebek-Ra's thumb hit the Lantean release crystal--not just decoupling the cryo-pod, but triggering a concealed Asgard phase-flash emitter hidden inside his gold-and-silver ouroboros lapel pin.

As the deck plates of the vault tilted another five degrees and a tongue of orange plasma fire licked past the outer corridor doorway, Teyla kept her rifle

steady on Sebek-Ra's chest while her dark eyes studied the sleeping face of Praetor Aurelius behind the frosted glass.

"You claim Praetor Aurelius was imprisoned beneath the sea because he refused to abandon the humans of Pegasus to the Wraith," Teyla said evenly. "Yet if he is truly a benevolent protector of humanity, why would he ever allow his knowledge to be used by a conqueror like you?"

"He wouldn't," Sebek-Ra said with disarming candor. "Which is precisely why I intended to overwrite his conscious mind with the Asgard transfer beam before waking him. Sadly, Dr. McKay's temporal firework display cracked my focal lens twelve seconds before the beam could breach the pod's quantum seal--leaving us at our current, rather pressing impasse."

"Forty-five seconds until the primary reactor containment bulkhead right behind that wall gives way!" McKay barked, staring at the structural thermal readout on his tablet, where the bulkhead behind Sebek-Ra was already glowing dull cherry-red from the two-million-degree plasma shaft on the other side. "Sheppard, if we don't decouple that pod right now and run, the back wall of this room is going to blow out into the core!"

"Shoot him and hit the release crystal!" Ronon growled.

As the cherry-red glow on the rear bulkhead of the Stasis Vault turned a blinding, incandescent white from the two-million-degree plasma shaft melting through the trinium plates behind Sebek-Ra, the temperature inside the room spiked thirty degrees in five seconds.

"Ten seconds until that rear wall vaporizes!" McKay screamed, his glasses sliding down his sweaty nose as he reached for the manual override lever on the side of the cryo-pod. "If the plasma jet breaches this room while the pod is still locked to the floor bus, the thermal shock will cook the Ancient inside like a lobster in a foil wrapper!"

"Drop your weapon and step away from the release crystal, Sebek-Ra, last warning!" Sheppard barked.

Instead, Sebek-Ra smiled, touched his thumb to the crystal, and triggered the blinding phase-flash in his lapel.

A blinding, strobing wave of white-gold phase light filled the vault for two seconds, temporarily whiting out their retinas and jamming the electronic optics of their weapons.

Sheppard fired a three-round burst straight through the spot where Sebek-Ra had been standing--hearing the distinct crack of bullets shattering the crystal brandy glass and striking the rear bulkhead--just as the entire rear wall of the vault blew outward into the burning central reactor shaft!

## CHAPTER NINE: The Living Ancestor

*Wherein a dying dreadnought falls from the sky, and First Recon pulls a miracle out of the fire.*

When the white phase-flash cleared from Sheppard's eyes, the rear third of the Auxiliary Stasis Vault had collapsed into the raging inferno of the Sol Invictus's main reactor chasm.

On the scorched deck plates beside the stasis pod lay Caelen Vane's shattered crystal brandy glass and a torn, singed scrap of his charcoal-black coat where Sheppard's bullets had grazed the edge of the abyss before the floor gave way into the white-hot plasma fire below.

"Did he fall into the reactor core or did he have a personal transport ring?!" Sheppard shouted over the deafening roar of the venting plasma shaft, peering down into the blinding wall of fire.

"Every Asgard transporter node within ten kilometers was fused by our temporal pulse, and there are zero life-signs anywhere on this deck except us and the guy in the pod!" McKay screamed, his eyes glued to his life-signs detector as the ceiling beams above them groaned and began to buckle. "Even a Goa'uld can't survive falling into a two-million-degree Lantean plasma core! He's dead! And we are going to be equally dead in forty-two seconds if we don't carry this pod to the Jumper RIGHT NOW!"

"The pod weighs eight hundred pounds!" Sheppard yelled.

"Not with the anti-gravity handling sled turned on!" McKay slapped the green Lantean transport rune on the side of the coral-crust ed stasis pod. Immediately, the pod's base hummed with a blue repulsor field, floating six inches off the deck plates so that Ronon and Sheppard could grab the side handles and push it at a dead run down the burning corridor.

They sprinted the three hundred meters back to the dorsal hangar bay with the floating stasis pod between them like a bobsled team in hell, dodging falling ceiling girders and secondary conduit blasts as the Sol Invictus's hull began to break apart in the upper stratosphere.

"Open the rear ramp!" Sheppard barked into his headset as they burst into the smoke-filled hangar deck.

Teyla sprinted ahead, vaulting up the open ramp of Puddle Jumper One and powering up the cockpit thrusters while Sheppard, Ronon, and a frantically pushing McKay shoved the eight-hundred-pound Lantean cryo-pod up the ramp into the rear compartment and locked its magnetic clamps to the deck.

"Go, go, go!" Ronon slapped the hatch seal button as Sheppard dove into the pilot's seat.

Puddle Jumper One shot out of the collapsing dorsal bay of the Sol Invictus at full emergency burn, engaging its cloak and diving straight toward the ocean as the two-kilometer dreadnought behind them finally reached critical mass.

High in the upper mesosphere above Lantea--safely above the atmosphere thanks to the altitude the ship had held during the siege--the Sol Invictus erupted in a silent, blinding golden-white nova that turned the storm clouds below to midday.

"Wait--look at the stasis pod!" McKay's voice rose from the back compartment as Sheppard leveled the Jumper out at five thousand feet above the calm waters inside the Atlantis shield dome. "The decoupling from the Sol Invictus's power grid triggered the pod's automatic revival sequence! The ten-thousand-year cryo-cycle is terminating on its own!"

Sheppard put the Jumper on autopilot glide toward the Atlantis east pier and stepped back through the bulkhead door into the rear compartment beside Teyla, Ronon, and McKay.

On the side of the coral-encrusted pod, the ancient Lantean status runes shifted from deep stasis amber to warm, pulsing emerald green. With a soft, pneumatic sigh of escaping nitrogen mist, the frosted crystal lid of the pod unlatched and slid slowly upward.

Inside lay a man in his late forties or early fifties, dressed in the clean, flowing white-and-silver robes of the ancient Lantean High Council. He had noble, aristocratic features, silver-threaded hair, and a peaceful, deeply intelligent expression.

As the mist cleared, the man took a long, shuddering breath, and his eyes--clear, warm, human hazel, without the slightest trace of golden glow--fluttered open. He looked up at Sheppard, Teyla, Ronon, and McKay, and whispered in soft, musical Ancient Latin: "Estne... civitas adhuc integra?"

"Wait--hold still, don't move," McKay said nervously, pointing his medical tricorder at the back of the man's neck. "I know the vacuum seal on the pod looked intact in the vault, and I know the Asgard emitter lens was cracked, but we are dealing with a guy who faked being a strawberry gummy worm for three weeks!"

As Puddle Jumper One streaked away from the exploding Sol Invictus and glided down through the clearing storm clouds toward the sunlit waters of Atlantis, Praetor Aurelius sat propped up on the rear bench between Teyla and Dr. McKay, wrapped in a warm thermal blanket.

Every thirty seconds on the flight down, McKay ran another diagnostic sweep with his medical tricorder--checking blood chemistry, potassium-naquadah ratios, protein markers, and neural synaptic rhythms--unable to shake the memory of the strawberry-gelatin symbiote decoy in Vault Four.

"You must forgive Dr. McKay, Praetor," Sheppard called back from the pilot's chair as he lowered the Jumper's landing gear over the East Pier balcony pad. "We've had a rough month with guests turning out to be someone else."

Aurelius smiled gently, looking at McKay's scanner with mild, scholarly curiosity. "Prudence is the first virtue of survival, Colonel Sheppard. In the final years of our war against the Wraith, my own Council failed precisely because we grew too proud to question our assumptions. Look at your scanner, Dr. McKay--if there is any test in our city's medical bay that will set your mind at ease, I submit to it gladly."

"See? Polite, cooperative, and he appreciates empirical verification," McKay muttered, tapping his screen one last time as the Jumper touched down on the pier. "Take notes, Sheppard."

When Puddle Jumper One touched down on the East Pier balcony of Atlantis and the rear ramp lowered into the cool, salt-scented breeze of the Lantean evening, a dozen medical technicians led by Dr. Jennifer Keller and Richard Woolsey were already waiting with a floating Lantean gurney.

All across the city piers, expedition scientists, Marines, and Athosian security personnel stepped out onto the balconies to watch in hushed awe as the tall, silver-haired Ancient in the white High Council robes walked slowly down the ramp of the Jumper under his own power, supported gently by Teyla and Sheppard.

For four years, the Atlantis expedition had lived inside the echoes of the Ancients--sleeping in their rooms, flying their ships, and fighting their leftover wars. Every time they had actually met living Ancients before--the crew of the Tria, or the illusions of the Ark--it had ended in disappointment, arrogance, or tragedy.

Watching Praetor Aurelius pause on the pier, kneel to touch the ancient stone floor with a hand that trembled with gratitude, and then look up at Woolsey with warm, humble eyes to thank them in soft English for saving his home... even the most cynical Marines on the pier felt a lump in their throats.

"Get him to the infirmary and run every quarantine protocol in the book," Sheppard told Keller quietly once Aurelius was out of earshot--then added with a crooked smile, "And once he passes, somebody get the guy a real meal. Ten thousand years without a turkey sandwich has got to be rough."

Aurelius looked at McKay with clear, gentle hazel eyes and bowed his head slightly, pulling aside the collar of his white Lantean robe so they could clearly see the smooth, unblemished skin along his cervical spine. "Non timeas, amice... Do not fear, my friend. I heard voices outside my chamber before the cold mist lifted. One spoke with great pride of taking my vessel... before the thunder shook the stars. Is the shadow gone?"

"Zero symbiote DNA, zero naquadah in the bloodstream, zero surgical entry marks, and his synaptic EEG matches the standard Lantean High Council baseline down to the fourth decimal place," McKay said, finally lowering the scanner in relief. "The temporal EMP really did blow out Sebek-Ra's consciousness-transfer lens twelve seconds before it could breach the pod's shielding. He's clean."

## CHAPTER TEN: The Benevolent Architect (And the Twist in the Coral)

*Wherein Atlantis celebrates a victory over the Gilded Armada, Praetor Aurelius heals the wounded, and a shadow smiles behind hazel eyes.*

Forty-eight hours after the Battle of the Nine Suns, the mood inside Atlantis was nothing short of euphoric.

Out in high orbit, the two intact, powerless Aurora-class battleship hulls (Hyperion and Themis) that had been disabled by the Naglfar's temporal EMP were already being boarded by Atlantis engineering teams and Dr. Zelenka's salvage crews, promising to give the expedition its own pair of Lantean capital ships once their fused relays were replaced. The six surviving Vanir cruisers had fled beyond the outer rim of Sector Nine, their alliance shattered.

And in the Atlantis infirmary, a miracle was taking place.

Praetor Aurelius of Lantea--weak at first from ten millennia in deep-crust suspension, yet remarkably lucid and unfailingly gracious--walked slowly between the infirmary beds alongside Dr. Jennifer Keller and Richard Woolsey.

Unlike the arrogant, condescending Ancients of the Tria who had kicked the expedition out of Atlantis in Year Three before getting themselves killed by the Asurans, Aurelius was everything humanity had ever hoped the Builders of the Stargates would be.

He listened with quiet humility when Woolsey explained how the Ancients' old mistakes had left the Pegasus galaxy at the mercy of the Wraith and the Replicators. He wept openly when Teyla told him of the thousands of human worlds that had endured ten millennia of cullings while his Council slept or ascended into non-interference. And when he stopped beside the bed of a young Marine corporal who had suffered severe third-degree plasma burns when Pier Three's conduit blew during the siege, Aurelius simply placed both palms gently over the Marine's chest and closed his eyes.

A soft, warm, pure-white Lantean aura--the natural biological healing gift of an Ancient whose brain had reached eighty-eight percent synaptic activation on the threshold of ascension--flowed from Aurelius's hands into the wounded Marine. Within twenty seconds, the scar tissue and nerve damage vanished completely.

"Incredible," Dr. Keller breathed, staring at her biometric tablet as Aurelius swayed slightly from the exertion and Teyla caught his arm to steady him. "His neural physiology is operating at near-ascended harmonic efficiency, and there's zero foreign cellular material anywhere in his bloodstream or spinal column. I ran three full-body MRI scans, an ultrasound of his cervical spine, and a blood-naquadah screen. He's one hundred percent pure, living Lantean."

"And we can't thank you enough for what you did in the ZPM hub this morning, Praetor," McKay said--and for perhaps the first time in recorded history, Rodney McKay sounded genuinely respectful of another scientist. "Wait until Carter sees the sub-quantum phase stabilization equations you wrote out for our ZPM! You boosted our remaining Zero Point Module's efficiency by forty-two percent with six lines of math!"

"A minor calibration, Dr. McKay," Aurelius said with a warm, fatherly smile, resting a hand briefly on McKay's shoulder. "In fact... once my strength returns, I would be honored to accompany you and Colonel Sheppard back to Terra--Earth--aboard your vessel Daedalus. The planetary defense chair you described in Antarctica, and the Stargate network of our original home galaxy, have been running without maintenance for ten millennia. With the knowledge stored in my mind, we can upgrade Earth's shields so that no enemy--neither Wraith, nor Ori remnants, nor any false god--can ever threaten our two worlds again."

Woolsey beamed. "General O'Neill and the IOA have already approved your visit,

Praetor Aurelius. The Daedalus arrives in orbit tomorrow morning to escort you and First Recon to Earth."

Three levels below the infirmary, in the quiet solitude of the East Pier guest quarters, Praetor Aurelius of Lantea locked the balcony door, walked over to the small washbasin mirror, and poured himself two fingers of Lantean amber brandy.

He raised the glass to his reflection in the mirror--and smiled.

It was the exact, razor-sharp, self-deprecating smile of Caelen Vane.

No snake coiled around his cervical spine. No trace of naquadah polluted his blood. Dr. Keller's MRI and ultrasound scans had been completely accurate: there was no physical Goa'uld symbiote inside Praetor Aurelius's body.

Because a god who has mastered both Asgard consciousness-transfer physics and Lantean eighty-eight-percent synaptic memory encoding no longer needs a slimy, vulnerable aquatic worm in his neck to take a host.

What McKay had not realized on the Sol Invictus was that an Asgard optical consciousness-transfer beam operates on a quantum-tunneling neutrino frequency that passes straight through a transparent Lantean crystal cryo-window without ever breaking the physical vacuum seal! Sebek-Ra had completed the full neural transfer into Praetor Aurelius's sleeping brain twenty-five minutes before the Naglfar ever detonated its temporal core.

And once Sebek-Ra's consciousness was safely seated inside the vast, crystalline cathedral of Aurelius's Lantean mind inside the pod, he had used his new host's own telekinetic gift from inside the glass to crack the exterior lens of the tripod emitter, reset the pod's external clock to 'deep delta sleep,' and leave his previous human host--poor, mind-wiped Caelen Vane, programmed with a simple ten-minute post-hypnotic script--standing outside the glass holding a brandy snifter to put on a show for Colonel Sheppard!

Resting both hands on the cool Lantean stone balustrade of the balcony, Sebek-Ra closed his hazel eyes and let his new Ancient consciousness expand outward. With a mere flick of his mental finger, he lifted a smooth pebble from the balcony planter box, floated it into the air in front of his face, and compressed its molecular lattice until the stone glowed white-hot and turned into a flawless diamond.

And best of all, buried deep in Praetor Aurelius's ten-thousand-year-old memories, Sebek-Ra had found the real reason the Lantean High Council had quarantined Aurelius beneath six miles of rock: The Aethelgard--a three-kilometer, white-and-gold crystalline dreadnought hidden in deep stasis inside the

intergalactic void between Pegasus and the Milky Way, equipped with an Ori-style Prior-Resonance Subspace Conduit designed to harvest bio-psychic energy from billions of human minds across an entire galaxy to force-ascend its commander into a living, physical god!

Later that evening, after Colonel Sheppard left the East Pier guest quarters and walked back toward the central tower with his empty coffee mug, Sebek-Ra--wearing the living body and near-ascended brain of Praetor Aurelius--stood once more before the terminal in his quarters.

With a single thought projected directly from his eighty-eight-percent active Lantean cerebral cortex, he accessed the deepest, unindexed sub-layer of the Atlantis city database--a partition so ancient that neither McKay, Zelenka, nor even Elizabeth Weir had ever suspected it existed.

In less than four seconds, he downloaded the complete navigational telemetry for the Milky Way Stargate network, the exact Defense Chair harmonic codes for the Antarctic Outpost on Earth, and the subspace wake coordinates of the hidden Lantean-Asgard prototype dreadnought Aethelgard sleeping in the intergalactic void.

"Thirty thousand years of Asgard science," Sebek-Ra whispered softly in the dark, watching the golden-white Lantean light dance across his fingertips, "ten thousand years of Ancient mastery, and the unconquered will of a god. Sleep well tonight, Atlantis. Tomorrow, we go to Earth."

At dawn the next morning, the USS Daedalus dropped out of hyperspace in high orbit above Atlantis, her steel battlecruiser hull gleaming in the early sunlight as she took up station beside the two captured, powered-down Aurora battleship hulls.

Down in the Atlantis Gate Room, First Recon stood with their travel packs beside Praetor Aurelius, waiting for Colonel Caldwell's Asgard transport beam to bring them aboard for the high-speed run back to Earth.

"Now remember, Radek," McKay lectured Zelenka, wagging a finger in the Czech scientist's face while holding a backup hard drive containing Praetor Aurelius's ZPM optimization equations, "while I'm at the SGC helping Carter and Praetor Aurelius upgrade the Antarctic Chair, you are not to touch the primary hyperdrive couplings on those two captured Aurora ships! Wait until I get back so we can integrate the Asgard shield matrices properly!"

"Yes, yes, Rodney, go save Earth and try not to take credit for the Praetor's math before you even reach Midway," Zelenka muttered, waving him off.

Beside Sheppard, Praetor Aurelius looked up at the soaring stained-glass windows

of the control tower one last time, his hands folded serenely inside the sleeves of his white Lantean robes.

"Are you ready for your first trip on an Earth ship, Praetor?" Sheppard asked.

"More than ready, Colonel Sheppard," Aurelius--Sebek-Ra--replied with a gentle, radiant smile as the white flare of the Daedalus's Asgard transport beam enveloped them all. "I have waited ten thousand years to see what has become of Terra."

In the mirror, Praetor Aurelius's warm hazel eyes shimmered with the blinding, incandescent golden-white fire of an Ascended-threshold Ancient mind driven by the immortal ambition of Sebek-Ra.

"Tomorrow we sail for Earth, my dear Colonel Sheppard," Aurelius murmured in a voice of pure velvet, clinking his crystal glass softly against the mirror. "And when I sit in the Chair of my ancestors... the Milky Way shall see what a real god looks like."

## EPILOGUE & CLASSIFIED EXPEDITION DOSSIER: After-Action Technical & Tactical B

*Atlantis Expedition Archive — File Reference: SGC-ATL-512-ARMADA (EYES ONLY: O&#x27;NEILL / WOOLSEY / CALDWELL)*

MEMORANDUM FOR: General Jonathan J. O'Neill, Homeworld Security; Colonel Steven Caldwell, Commanding Officer, USS Daedalus; International Oversight Advisory (IOA).

FROM: Richard Woolsey, Expedition Commander, Atlantis; Lt. Col. John Sheppard, CO, AR-1; Dr. Rodney McKay, Chief Science Officer; Dr. Jennifer Keller, Chief Medical Officer.

SUBJECT: Defeat of the 'Gilded Armada' above Lantea (M35-117), Destruction of the Naglfar, Confirmation of Termination of Goa'uld 'Sebek-Ra,' and Upcoming Diplomatic Transfer of Living Lantean High Councilor Praetor Aurelius to Earth.

1. FORENSIC POST-MORTEM OF THE VELDARA STASIS DECOY: Contrary to the conclusions of Report SGC-ATL-449, the Goa'uld entity Sebek-Ra was not neutralized during the Niflheim crisis. Because Goa'uld consciousness is encoded holographically across cellular genetic memory rather than exclusively within the anterior ganglia, Sebek-Ra successfully regenerated his higher executive functions using High Geneticist Lokor's Asgard neural pathways as a structural scaffold. The resulting personality profile exhibited none of the theatrical instability typical of Milky Way System Lords, instead demonstrating a calm, charismatic, and highly analytical strategic intelligence comparable to the late System Lord Ba'al combined with full mastery of Asgard and Lantean physics.

2. TACTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 'GILDED ARMADA': Utilizing High Council coordinates extracted from Lokor's memory, Sebek-Ra (operating in the human host Caelen Vane) brokered an unprecedented alliance between six surviving Vanir Asgard strike cruisers and three mothballed Lantean Aurora-class battleships crewed by descendants of the Doranda Outcast fleet. By synchronizing Asgard phase-modulated ion beams with naquadah-enhanced Ancient drone salvos along a third-order Fourier harmonic curve, this combined fleet bypassed standard Lantean shield dispersion geometry, reducing the Atlantis city shield to 19% capacity within thirty-eight minutes.

3. NEUTRALIZATION OF THE ARMADA & LOSS OF THE NAGLFAR: First Reconnaissance Team (AR-1) successfully launched a cloaked Puddle Jumper from the submerged ventral bay, boarded the unmanned Asgard science vessel Naglfar in high lunar orbit, and bypassed its Goa'uld vocal-biometric security lockouts. By piloting the Naglfar into the center of the nine-ship formation and triggering an inverted temporal-harmonic overload in the vessel's time-dilation core, AR-1 disabled all nine enemy vessels simultaneously. The six Vanir cruisers retreated with severe system damage; two Aurora-class hulls (Hyperion and Themis) were captured drifting in orbit; and the flagship Sol Invictus suffered a fatal reactor breach.

4. CONFIRMATION OF SEBEK-RA'S DEMISE & RECOVERY OF PRAETOR AURELIUS: During the final boarding action aboard the Sol Invictus, AR-1 discovered that Sebek-Ra's orbital bombardment had served primarily as a diversion to mask a deep-crust quantum excavation twelve kilometers southwest of Atlantis. From a ten-thousand-year-old Lantean quarantine vault beneath the seabed, Sebek-Ra had extracted a cryogenic stasis pod containing Praetor Aurelius, former Chief Architect of the Lantean Defense Grid. During the ensuing firefight in the Auxiliary Stasis Vault, the floor beneath Sebek-Ra collapsed directly into the vessel's two-million-degree primary plasma core thirty seconds prior to total ship detonation. AR-1 successfully extracted Praetor Aurelius's stasis pod prior to hull failure.

5. MEDICAL & SECURITY CLEARANCE FOR EARTH TRANSIT: Dr. Jennifer Keller has conducted three independent full-body MRI scans, cervical spinal ultrasounds, and blood-naquadah assays on Praetor Aurelius. All tests confirm the complete absence of any Goa'uld symbiote, naquadah residue, or Asgard nanite infection. Praetor Aurelius has already demonstrated genuine Lantean biological healing capabilities and has increased Atlantis's ZPM output efficiency by 42%. He is scheduled to depart aboard the USS Daedalus alongside AR-1 at 0800 hours tomorrow to assist Stargate Command in upgrading the Antarctic Defense Outpost and the Milky Way gate network.

